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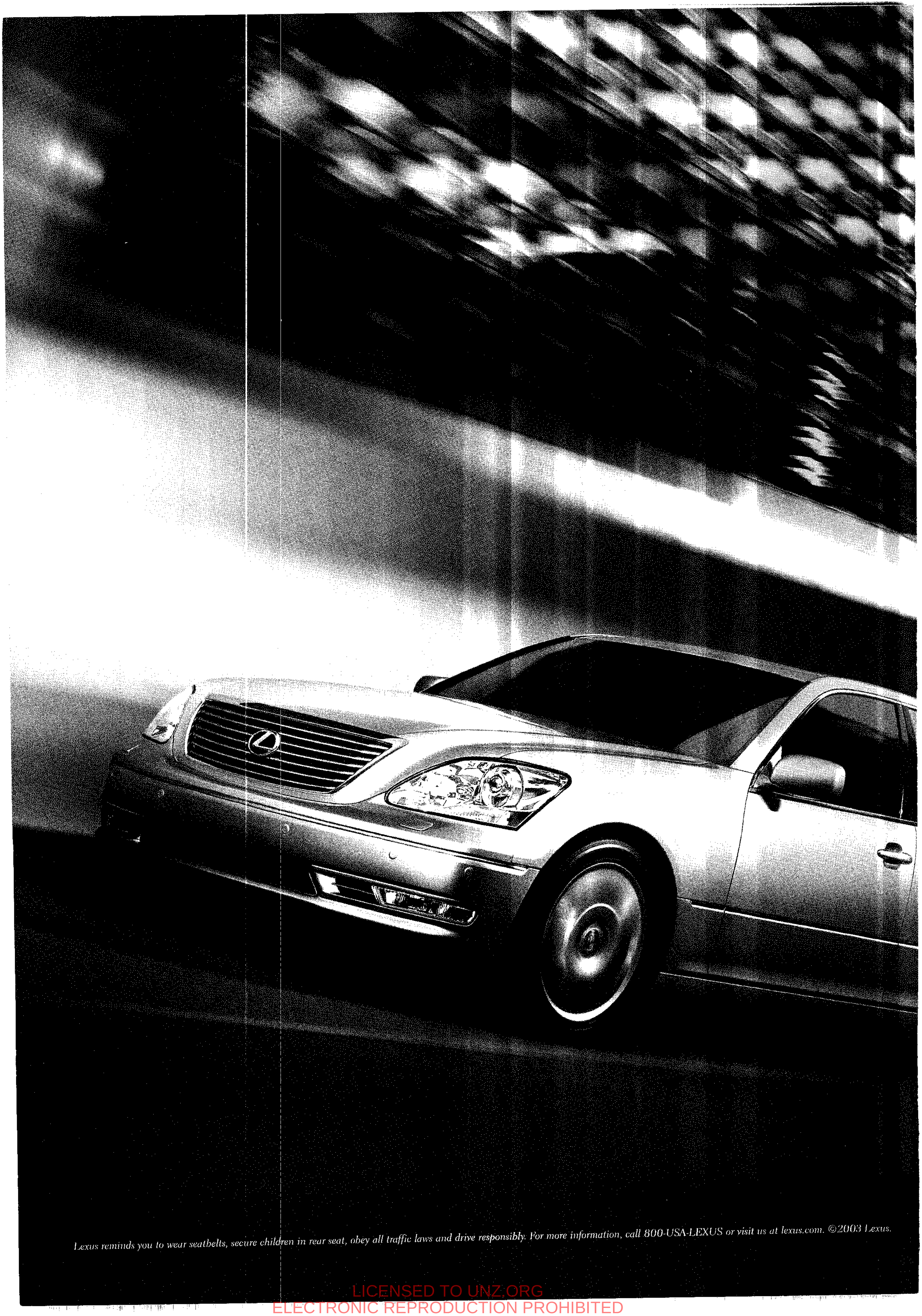
APRIL 19 & 26, 2004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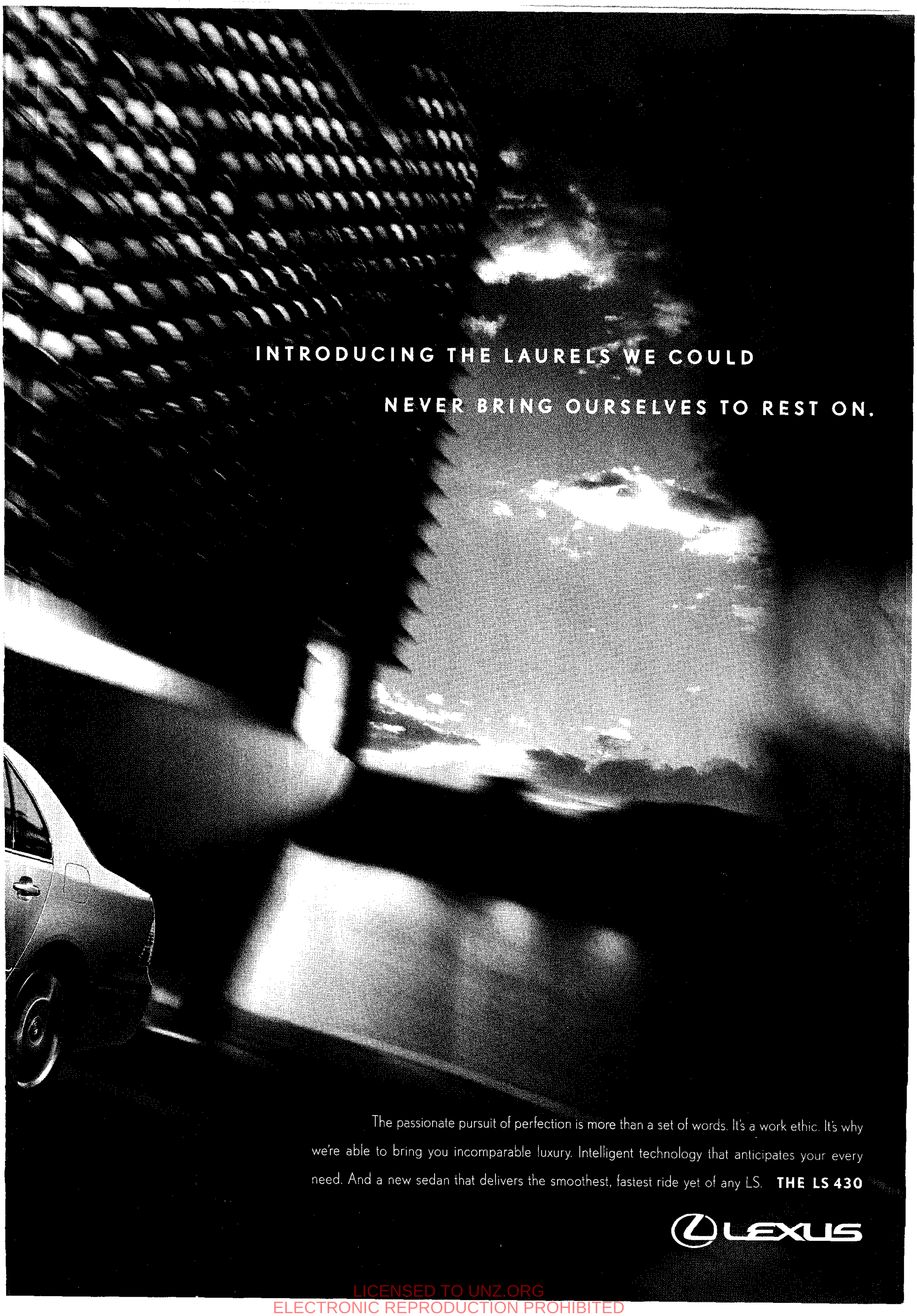

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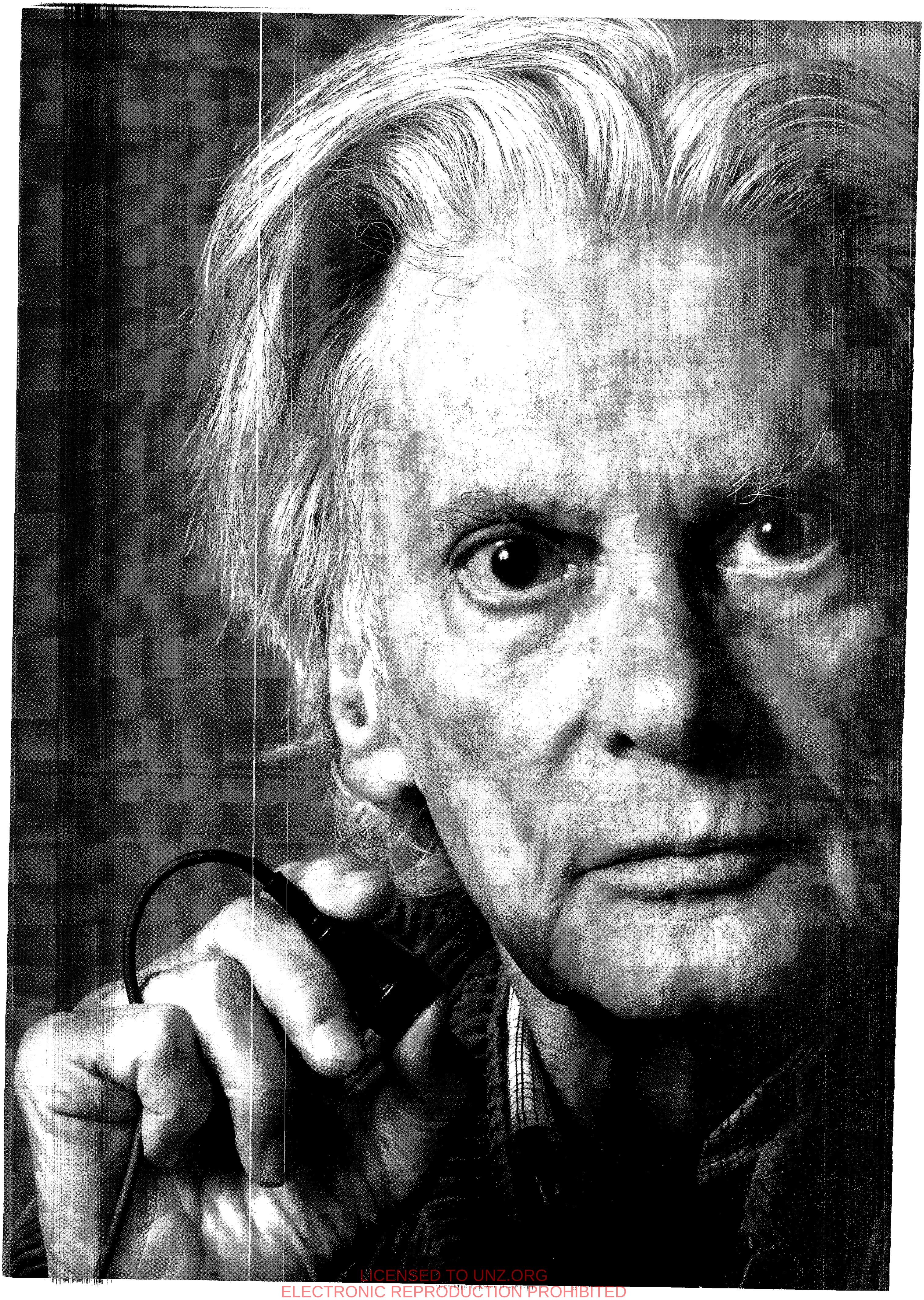

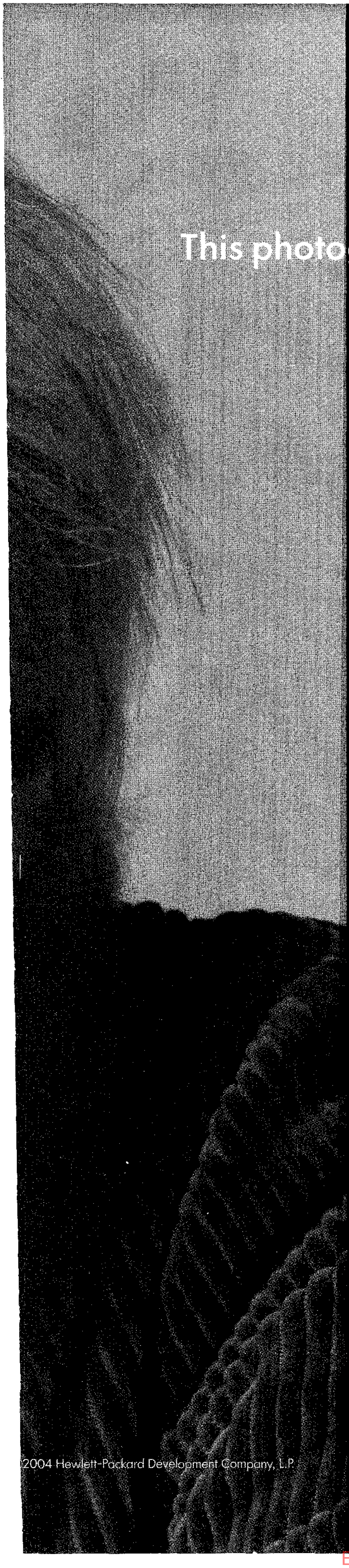

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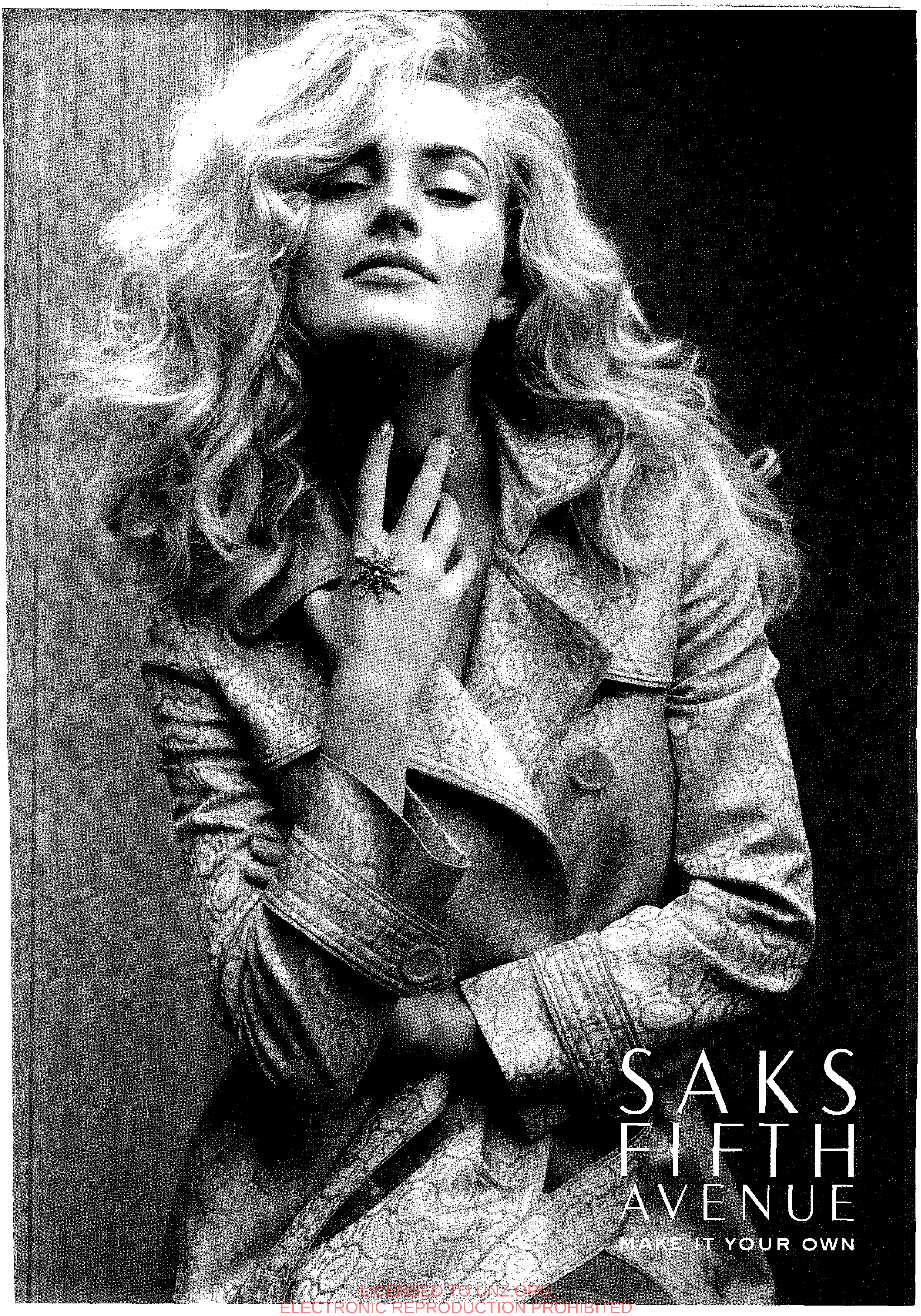

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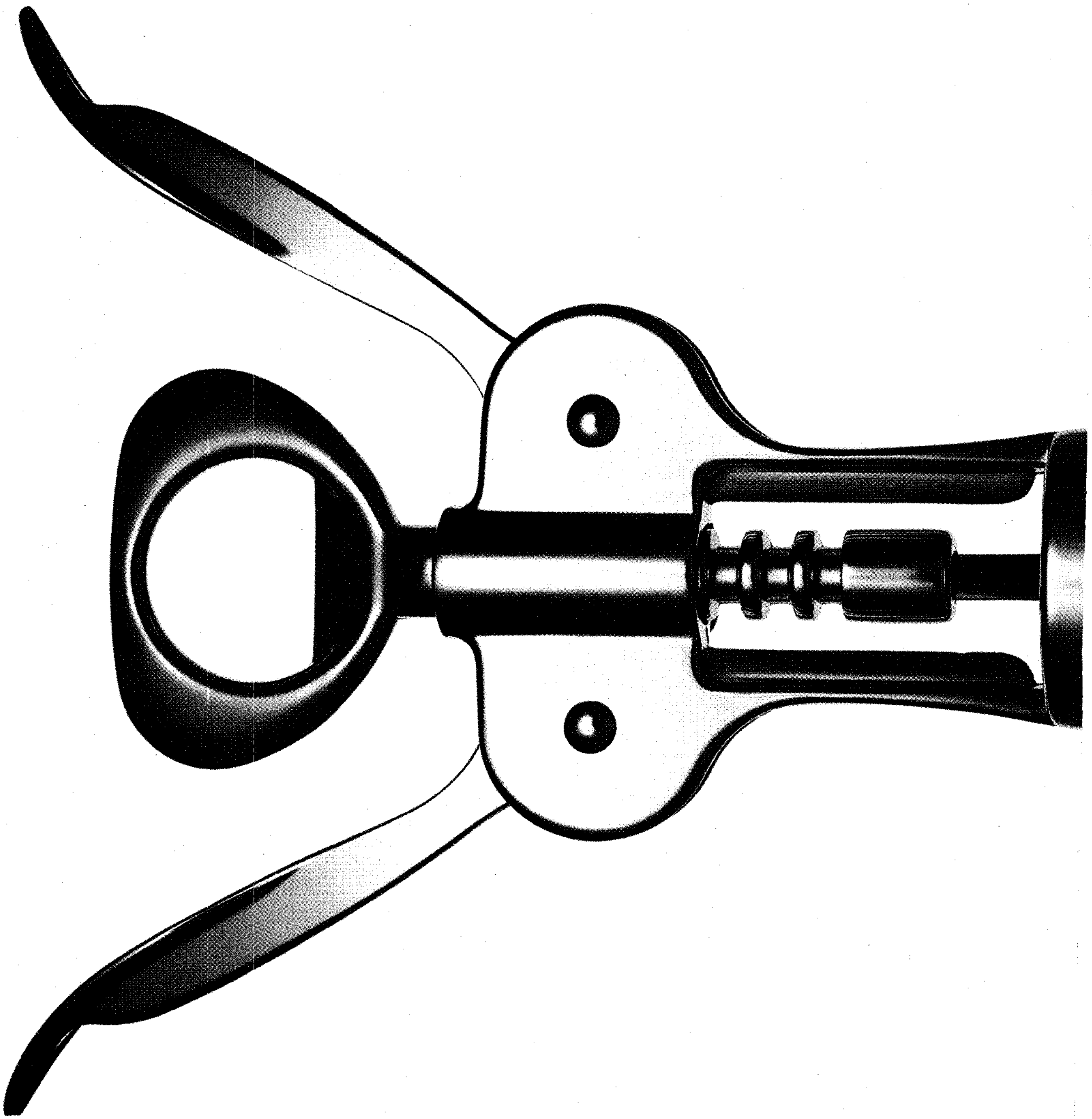

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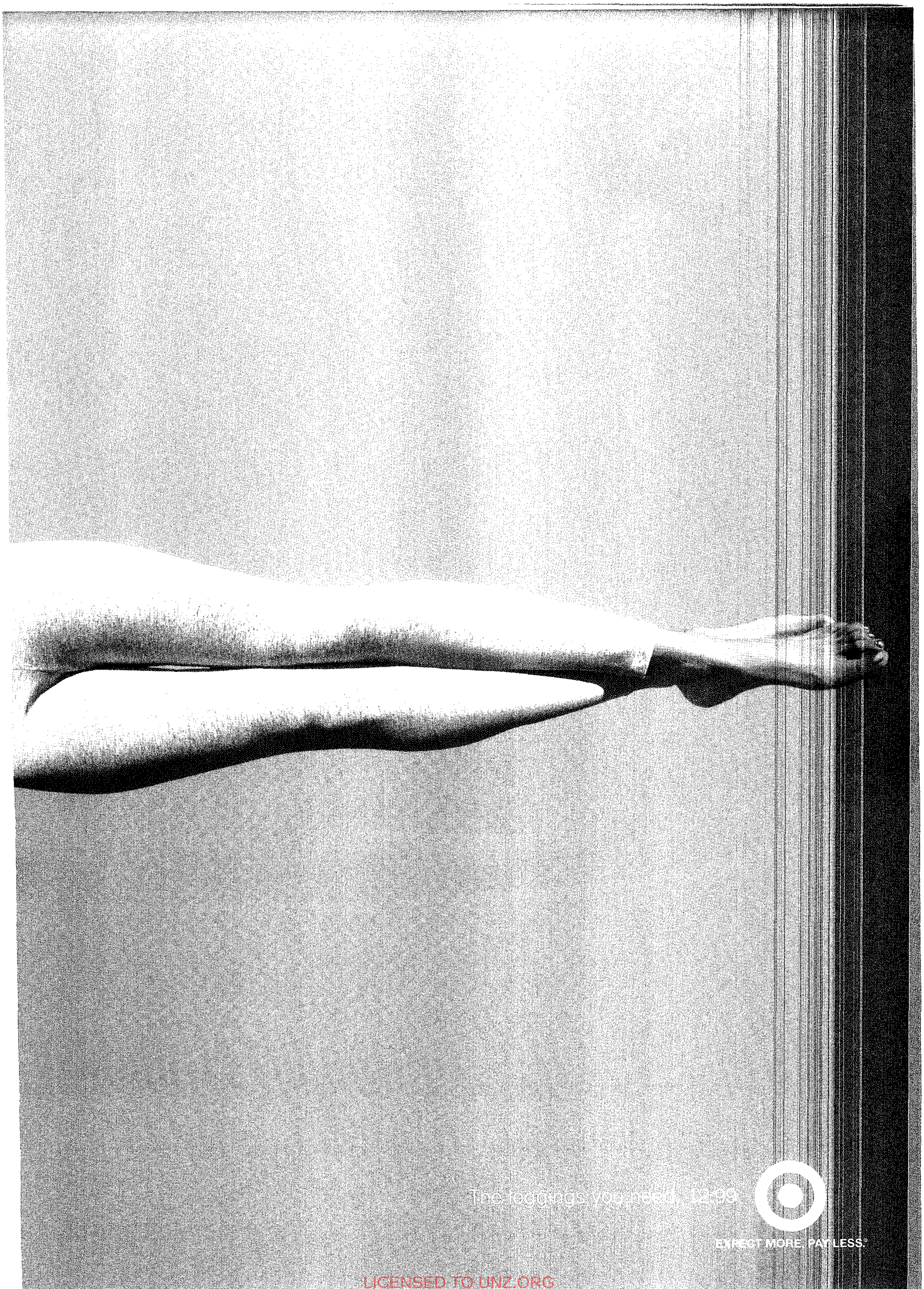
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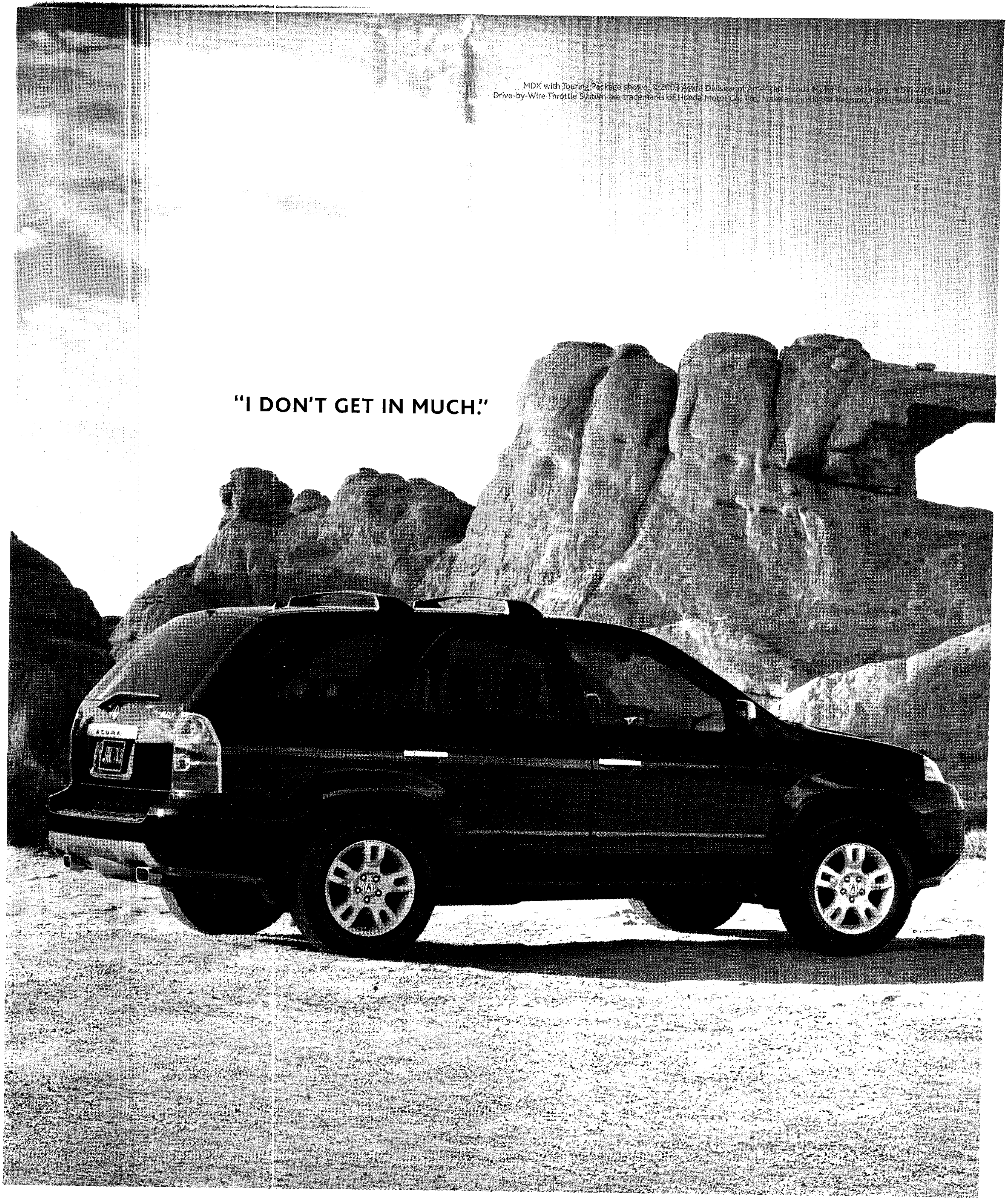
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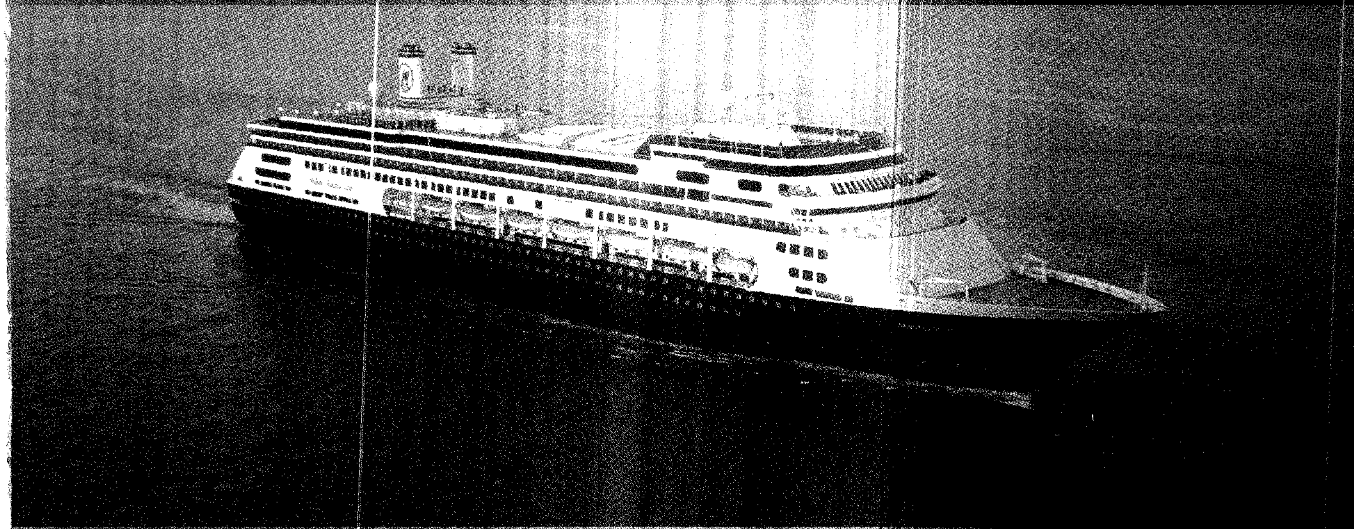

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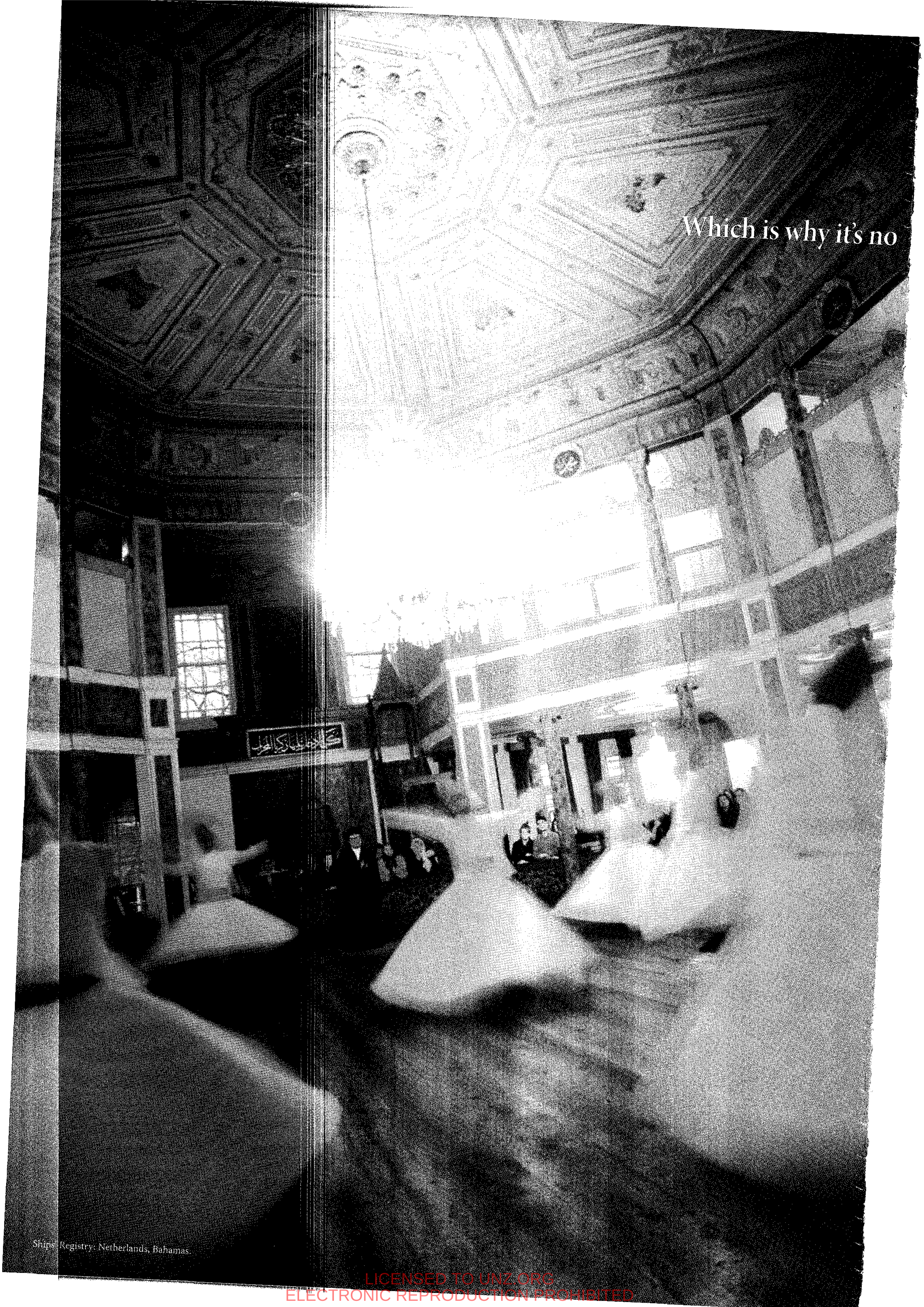
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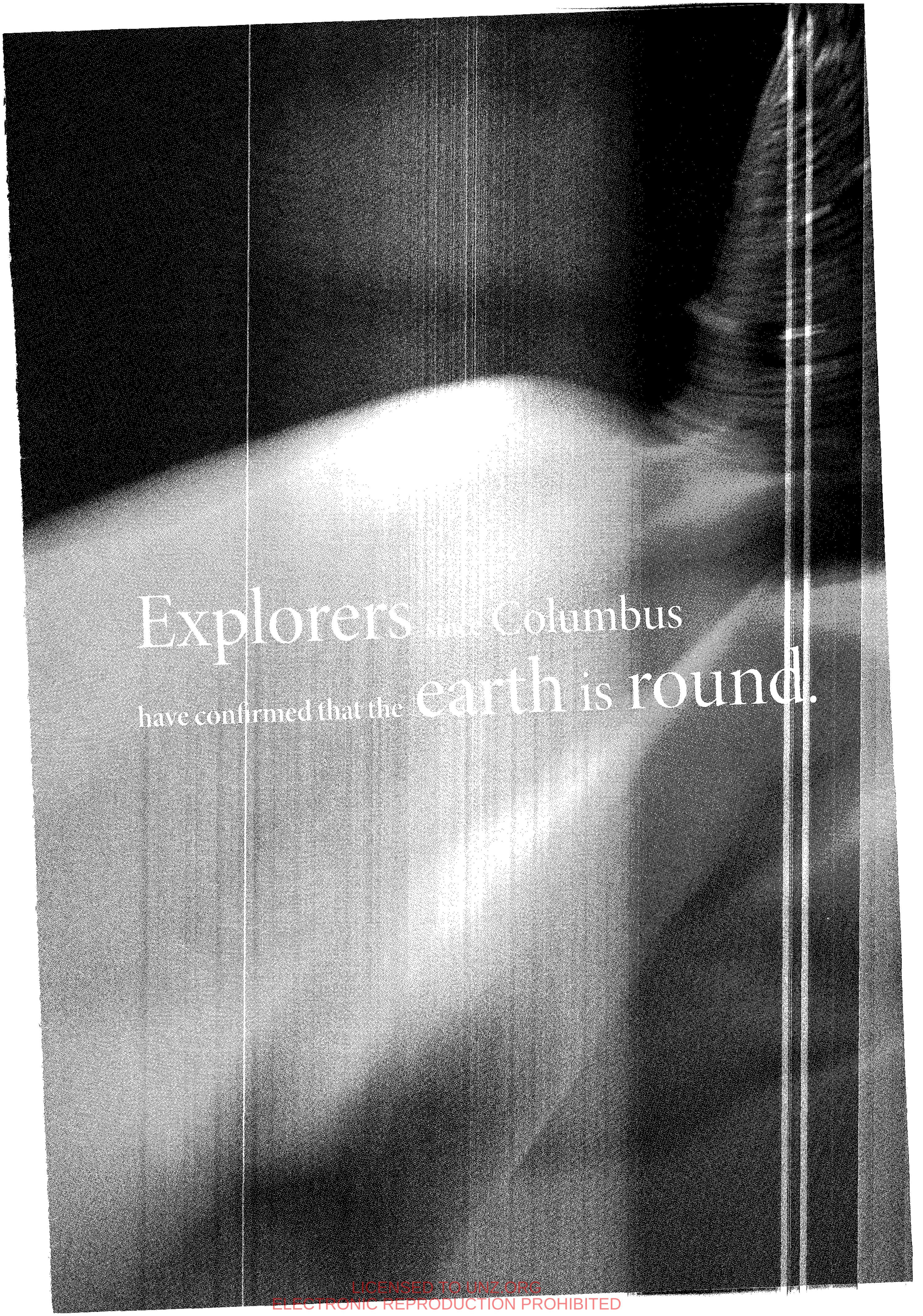
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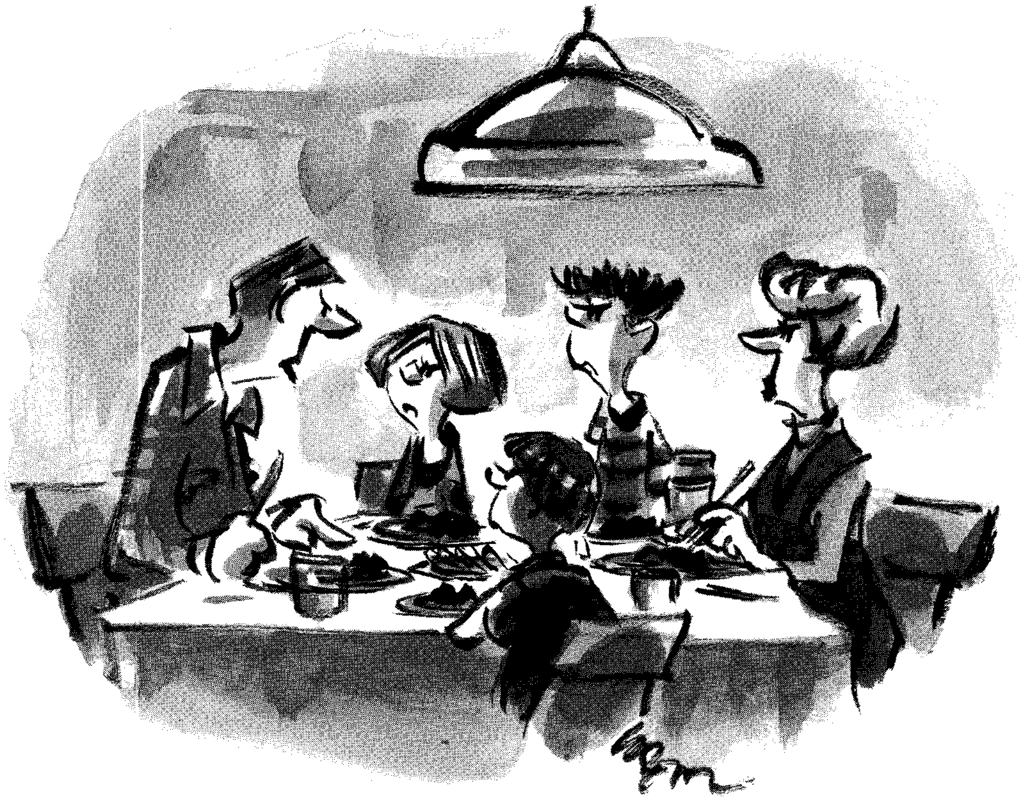

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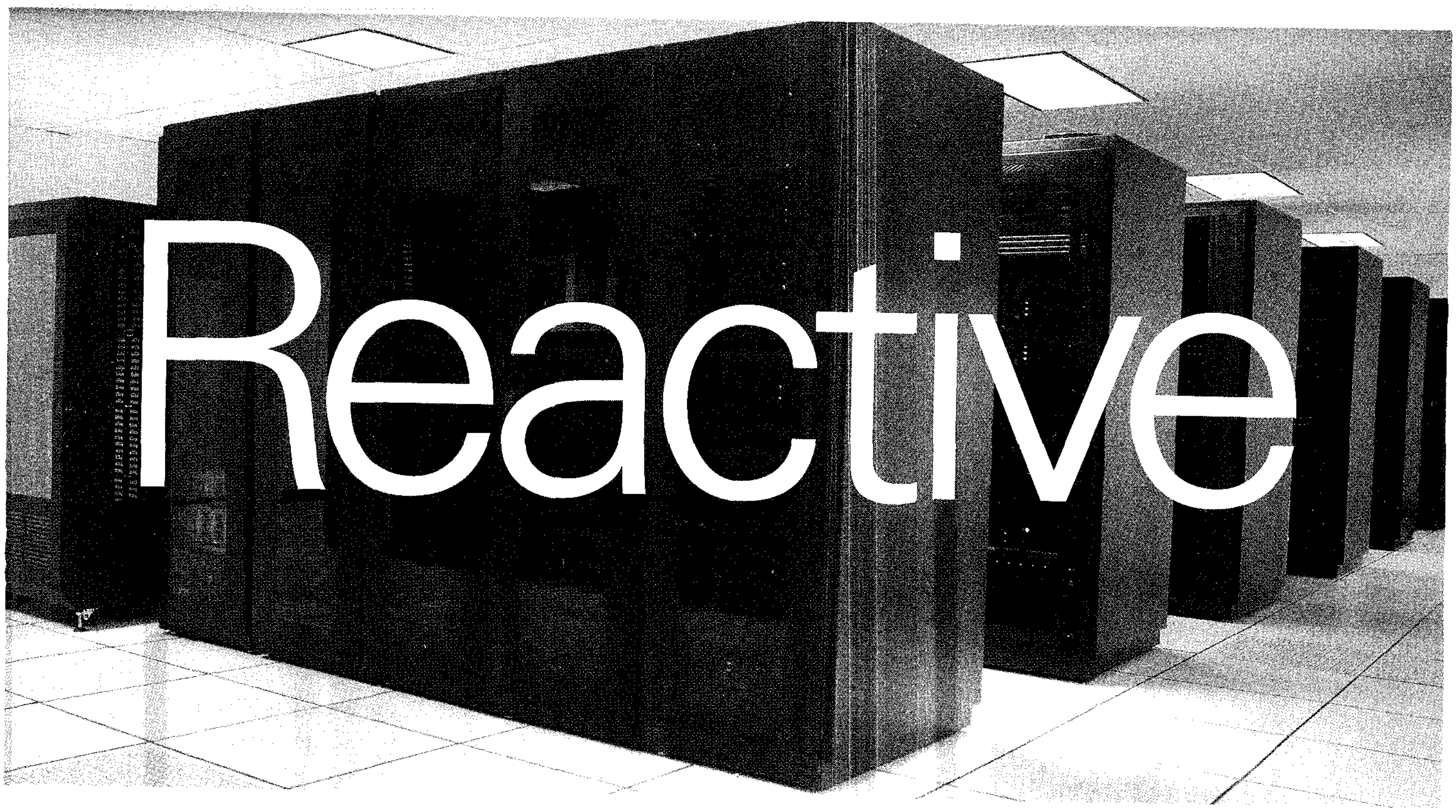

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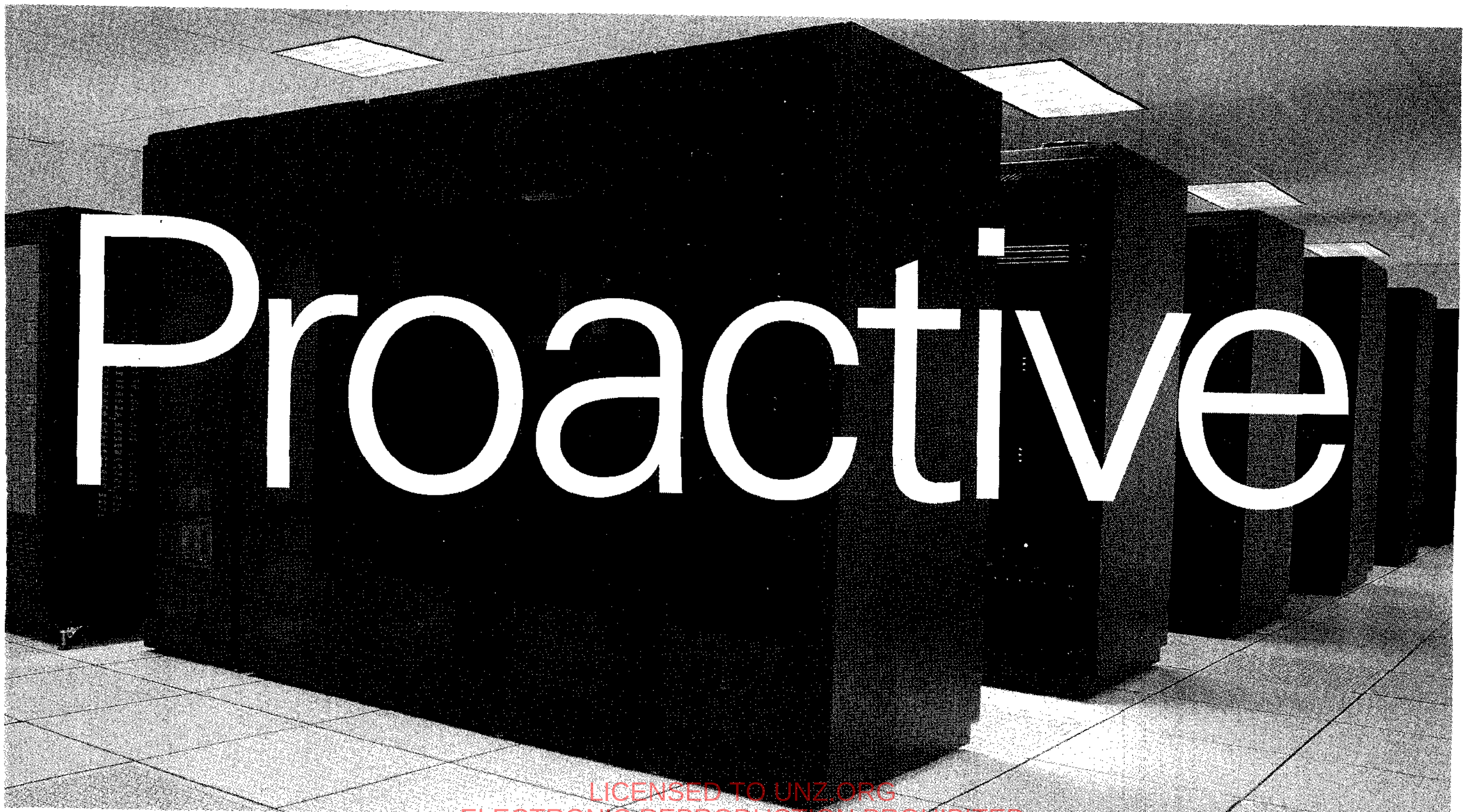

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Adrian Nicole LeBlanc ("On the Bark," p. 76) is the author of "Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx."

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David Sedaris ("Possession," p. 100) has a collection of essays, "Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim," coming out in June.

Elizabeth Kolbert ("Stooping to Conquer," p. 116) is a political correspondent for the magazine. Her book "The Prophet of Love: And Other Tales of Power and Deceit" will be published next month.

James Surowiecki (The Financial Page, p. 70) writes a regular column on business and finance. His book "The Wisdom of Crowds" comes out in May.

Anthony Lane ("Beyond a Joke," p. 138) is a film critic for the magazine and the author of "Nobody's Perfect: Writings from *The New Yorker*," which is out in paperback.

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Evan Ratliff (The Talk of the Town, p. 68), a contributing editor at *Wired*, is working on a book about science, technology, and terrorism.

Gerald Stern (Poem, p. 118) is the author of thirteen books of poems, including "Last Blue," and a memoir, "What I Can't Bear Losing."

Danny Shanahan (Cover; Cartoon, p. 161) is having an exhibition of his *New Yorker* covers and cartoons at the Cedar Tavern, in New York, in May.

David Owen ("Card Tricks," p. 106) has written a book about the history of the Xerox machine, "Copies in Seconds," which will be published in August.

Tad Friend ("Comedy First," p. 164) writes the Letter from California for the magazine.

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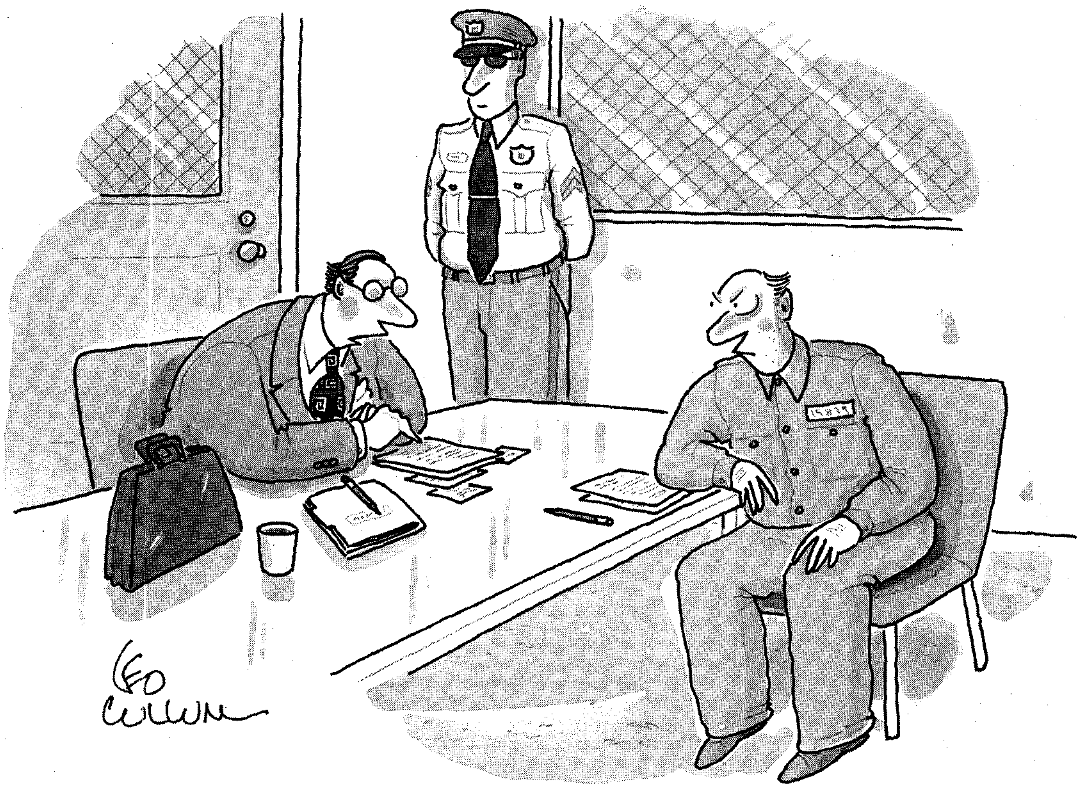
Nancy Franklin (On Television, p. 192) writes a regular column on television.

Alex Ross (Musical Events, p. 199) is the magazine's music critic.

Steve Brodner (The Back Page, p. 206) will publish "Freedom Fries," a collection of his political art from the Nixon years to the present, in September. ♦



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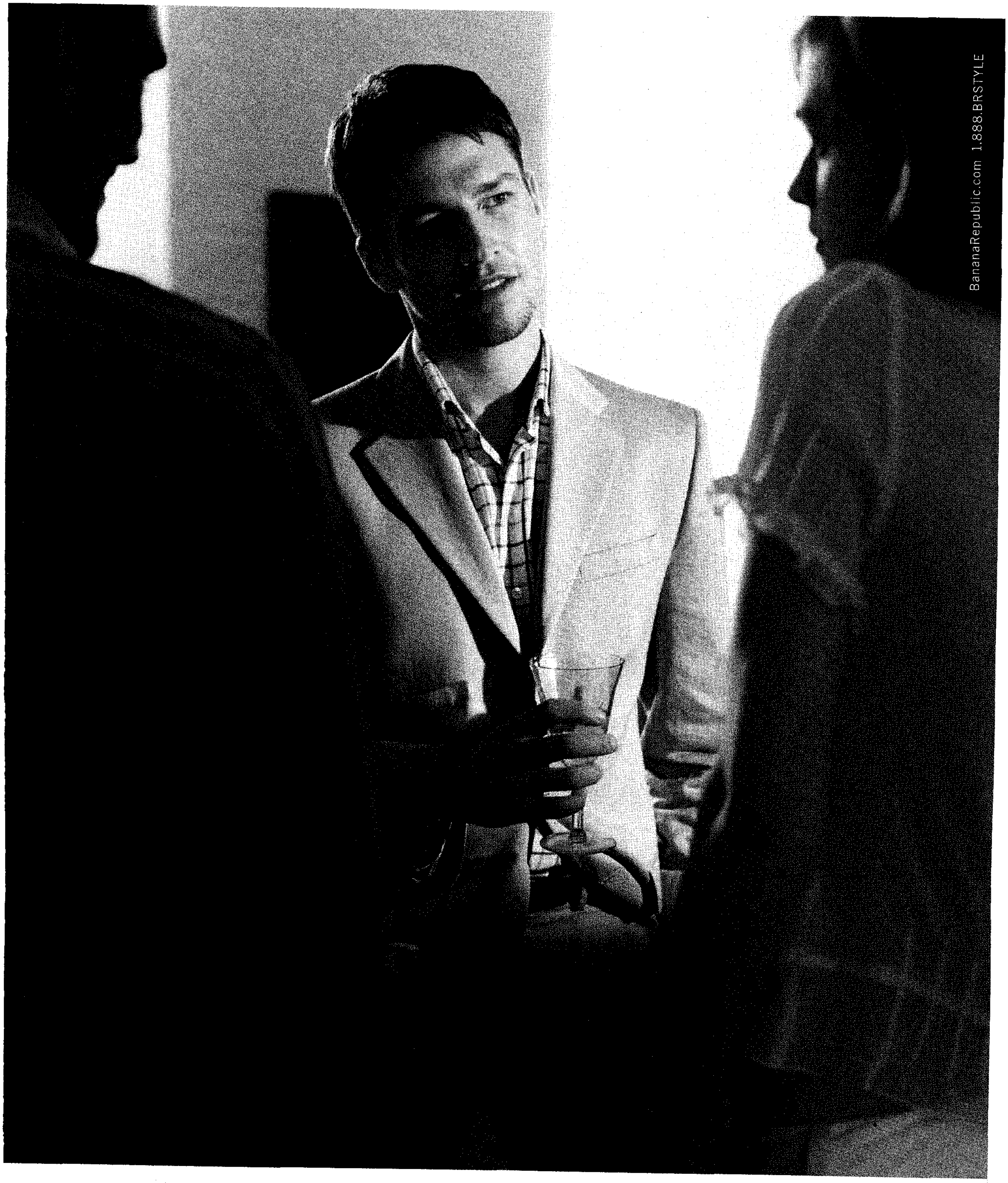
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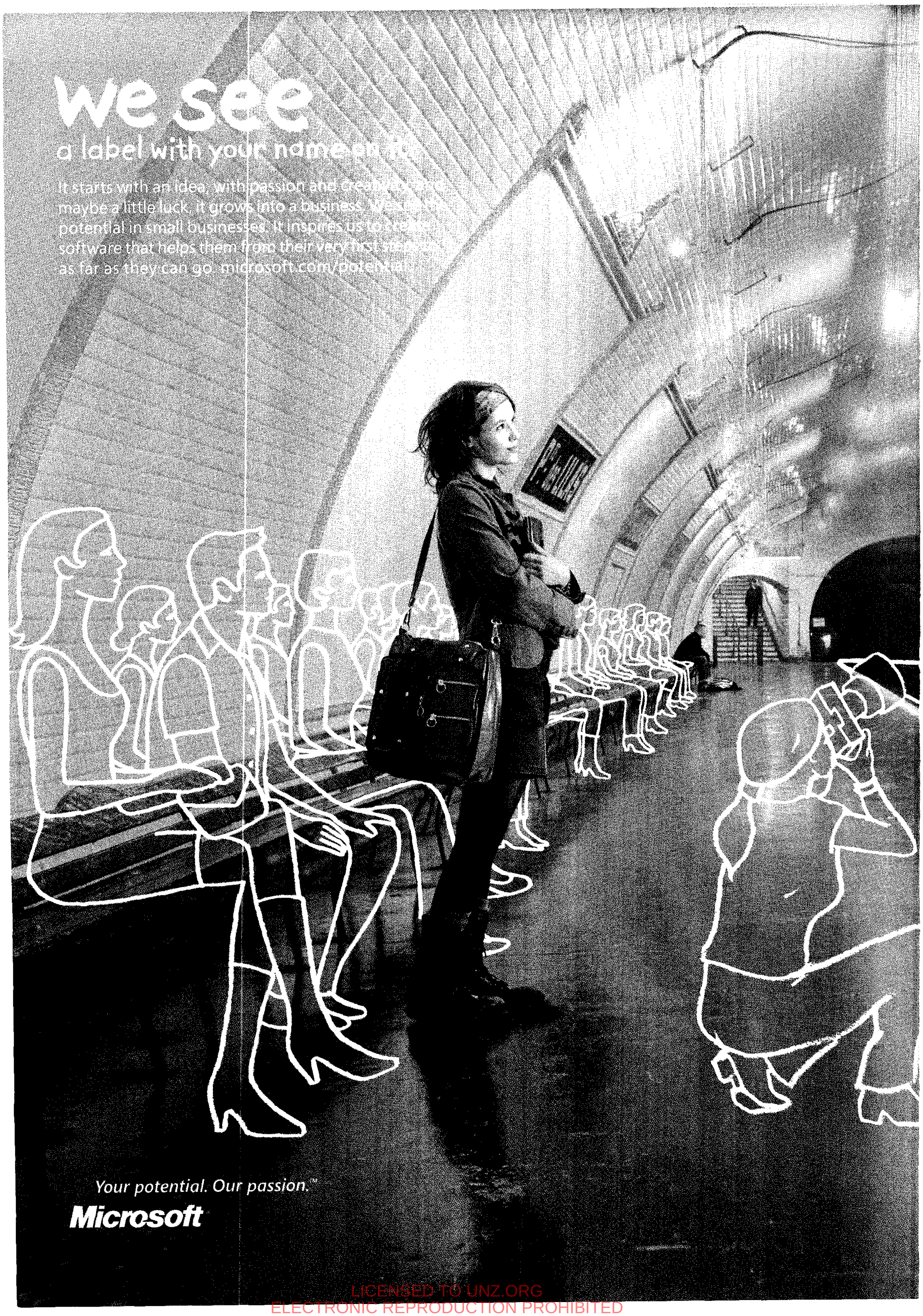
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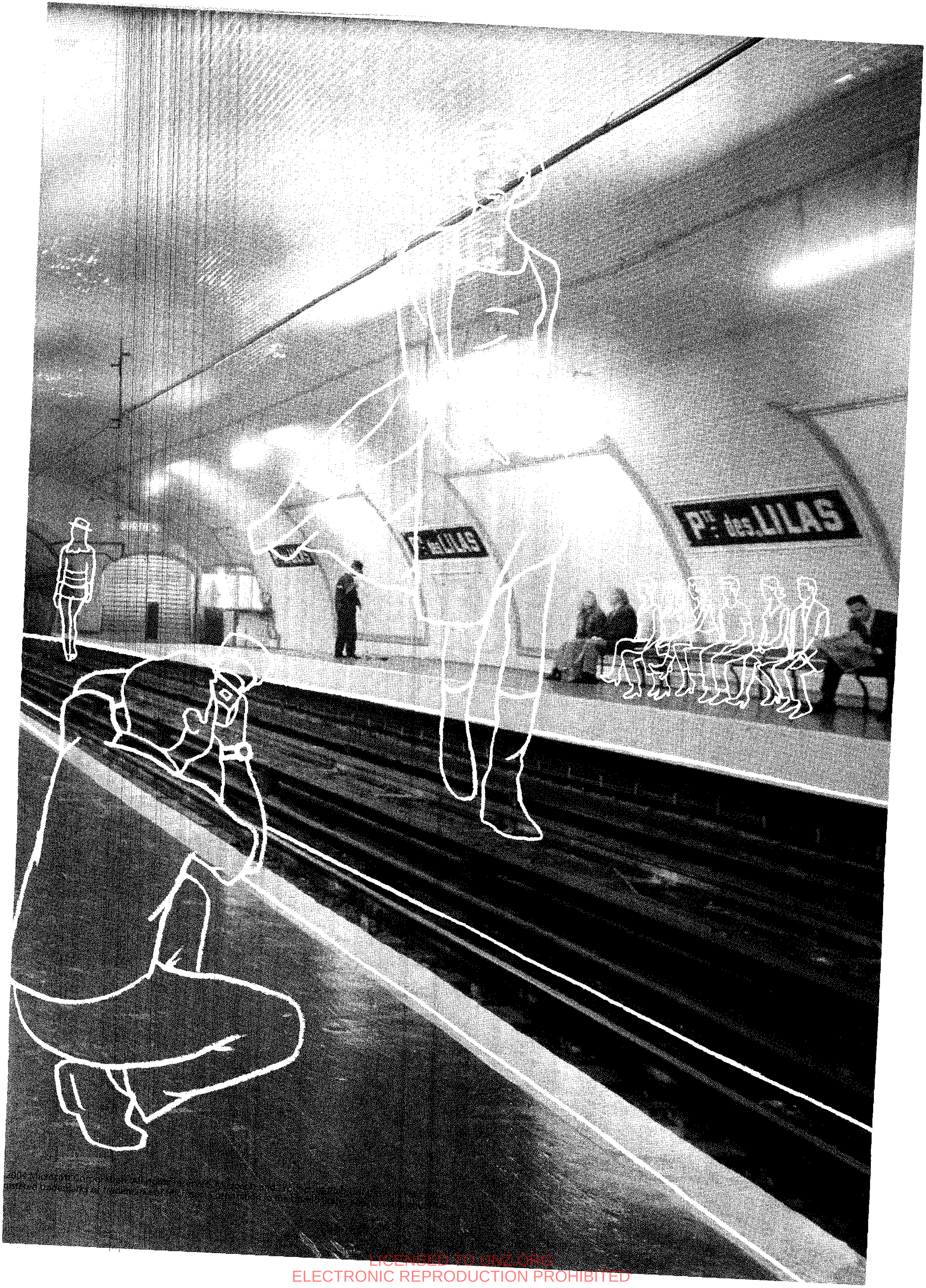
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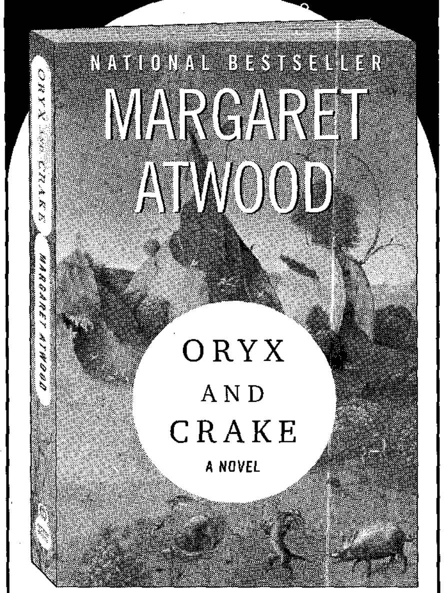

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THIS LAND WAS HIS LAND

David Hajdu, in his review of a biography of Woody Guthrie, writes that although Guthrie serves as an icon of "a romanticized heartland," he "was never really so authentic," given that his "people were . . . the American upper-middle-class élite" (Books, March 29th). But, even though Guthrie's father had some success as a rural land speculator, Woody's fortunes changed dramatically during his adolescence, and by the time he was sixteen his family was penniless and torn apart—his mother hospitalized with Huntington's disease, his sister killed by the third of four house fires (likely set by his mother), and the rest of the children, including Woody, orphaned out to various family members and friends. There is no doubt that Guthrie later exaggerated his "Okie" roots as a source of legitimacy, but the act worked because it was based in real-life experience. What made Guthrie authentic was not his drawl but his ability to relate to and speak for America's working poor. That's his real legacy.

Alastair Moock
Iowa City, Iowa

Hajdu writes that Woody Guthrie "became patriotic" only after Hitler "ventured into the Soviet Union." Guthrie was always staunchly anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi, though he was also, by nature, antiwar. But the more troubling part of Hajdu's characterization, especially in today's political climate, is the implication that one becomes patriotic by supporting one's government. Wasn't Guthrie being patriotic when he stood up for poor people during the Depression or when he fought for the labor movement? Was he being unpatriotic when he wrote "Pastures of Plenty" and "This Land Is Your Land"?

Scott Alarik
Cambridge, Mass.

POLITICS AND POLITESSE

Jeffrey Toobin, in his report on the conviction of Martha Stewart, notes that an investigation by a Republican-controlled House of Representatives committee accelerated Stewart's public fall from grace ("A Bad Thing," March 22nd). He also writes that Stewart was a close associate of several prominent Democrats, including Dick Gephardt and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. According to Federal Election Commission records, Stewart has contributed more than a hundred and sixty thousand dollars to Democratic candidates and causes since 1995, and nothing to their Republican counterparts. So why is Martha Stewart going to jail while Enron's Kenneth Lay walks? Could it, ironically, come down to a matter of basic etiquette—if you're going to commit a white-collar crime, be sure to invite both Democrats and Republicans to your dinner parties?

Chris Potter
Pittsburgh, Pa.

LOOKING FOR SALOME

Alex Ross, in his review of Karita Mattila in Richard Strauss's "Salome," at the Metropolitan Opera, writes, "Salome, the Bible tells us, danced for her stepfather, Herod" (Musical Events, April 5th). But, in fact, the Bible tells us so only indirectly. The two Gospels, Mark and Matthew, that include the story of the performance that cost John the Baptist his head identify the dancer as the daughter of Herod's wife, Herodias, but never give her the name Salome. (The Salome who appears elsewhere in the Bible, at Jesus' Crucifixion and at his tomb, is a different woman.) It is, instead, from another ancient authority, Josephus, that we know that Herodias's daughter was named Salome. And, of course, from Oscar Wilde.

Soren N. S. Laursen
Allendale, N.J.

•

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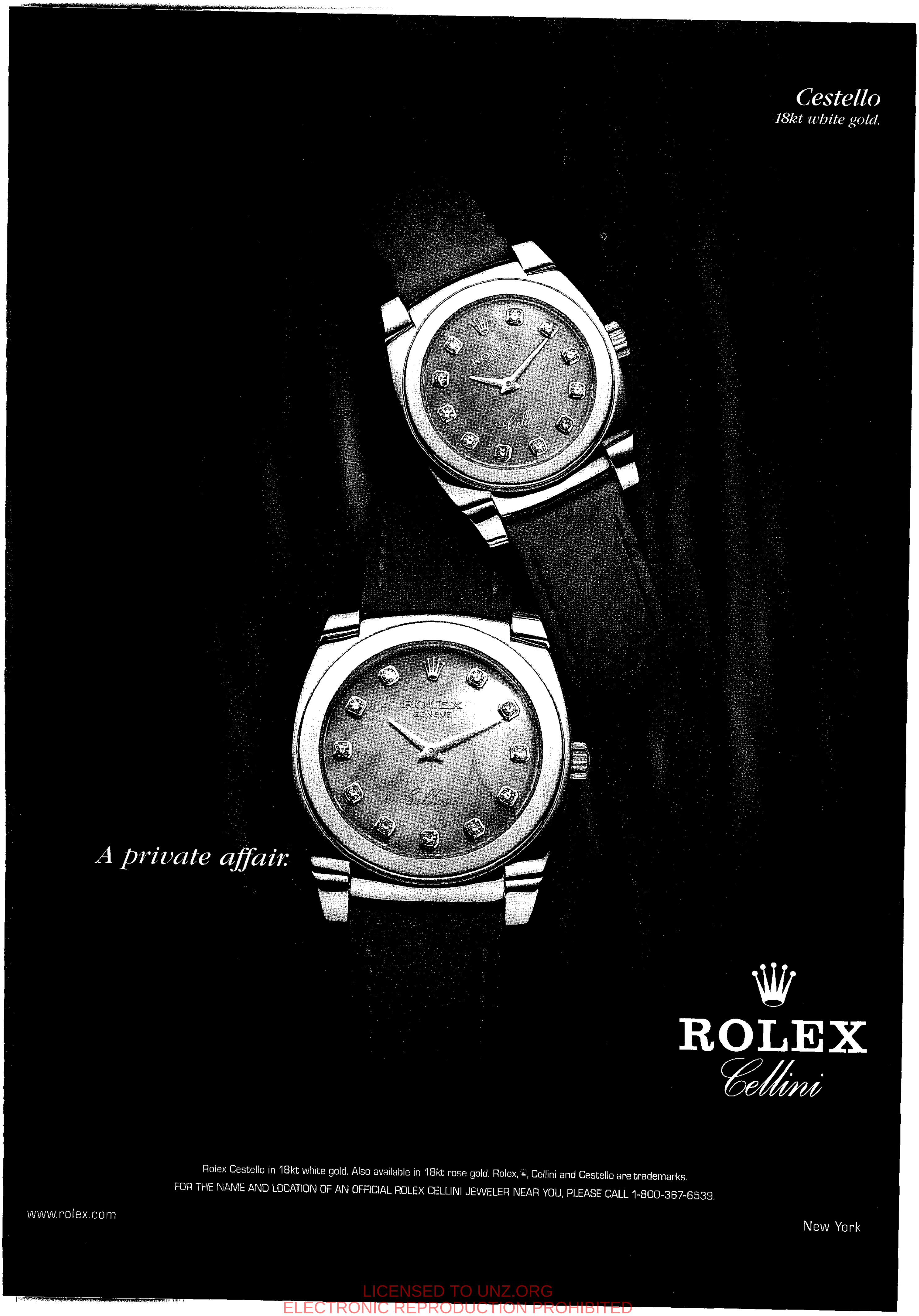

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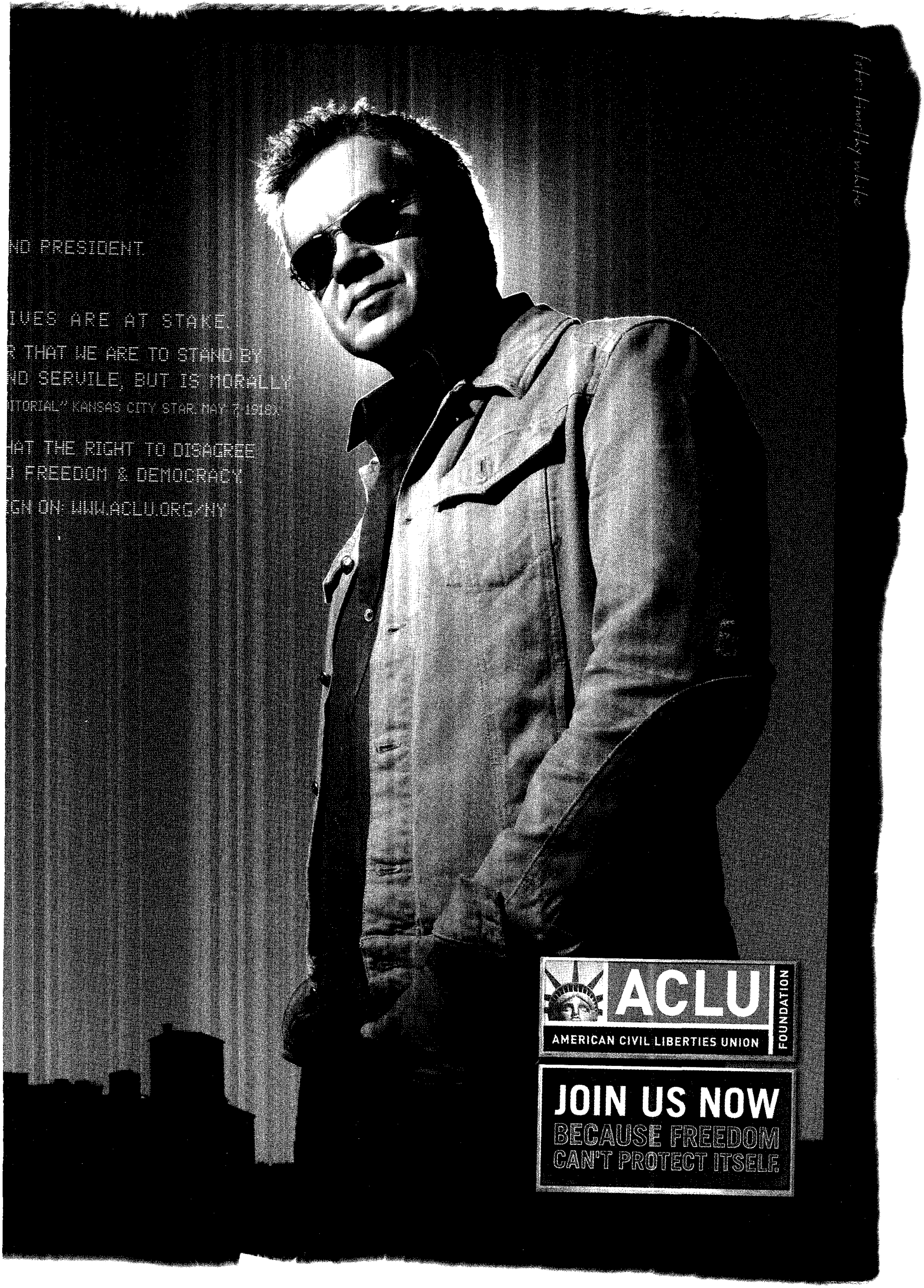

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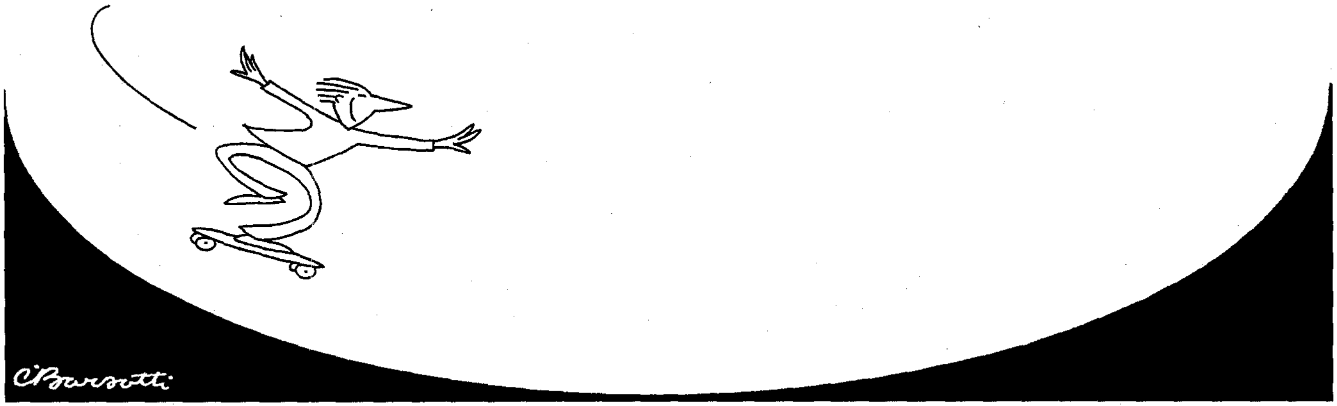

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THIS WEEK

REVIVING HANDEL

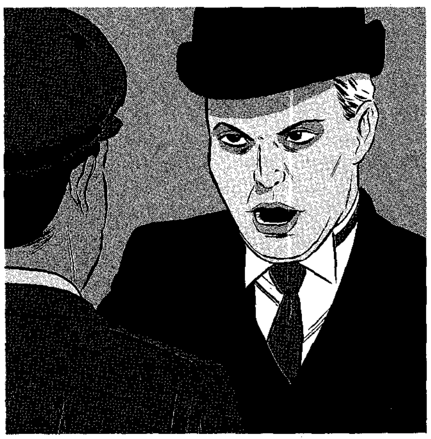
It's hard to believe that there are any more Handel operas left to revive, but the Venice Baroque Orchestra's performances of "Siroe" at BAM mark the American staged première of the work. A "Lear"-like saga set in ancient Persia, "Siroe" suffered the misfortune of opening in competition with "The Beggar's Opera" in 1728. The plot is exceedingly complicated, and the action lies entirely in a series of sweet and trenchant solo arias, without a single duet or ensemble scene to break the flow. All of this makes it ideal material for an imaginative director like Jorge Lavelli, whose bare-bones production mixes elements of between-the-wars Italy with sci-fi touches. Andrea Marcon leads his renowned early-music group from the harpsichord. (BAM Harvey Theatre, starts April 17; see Classical.)

BACK ON THEIR FEET

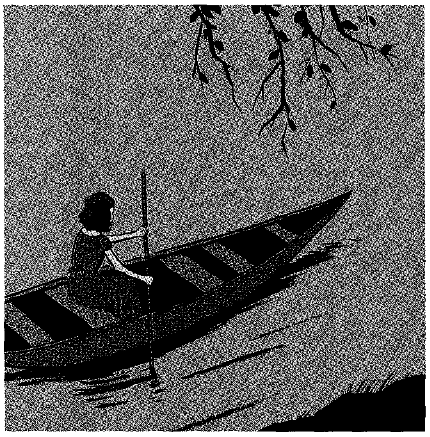
One of the most encouraging events in the dance world last year was the triumphant reëmergence of the Martha Graham Dance Company after a long period of legal, economic, and artistic troubles. America's oldest dance troupe returns with three programs that sample from Graham's formative solos, middle-period masterworks, and late-period whimsy. Some fine young dancers (especially the ferocious Fang Yi Sheu) bring new life to the repertory, inspired every night by the thirty-four-member orchestra that the company can now afford and the legacy it has not only inherited but earned. (City Center, starts April 14; see Dance.)

RENOIR'S INDIA

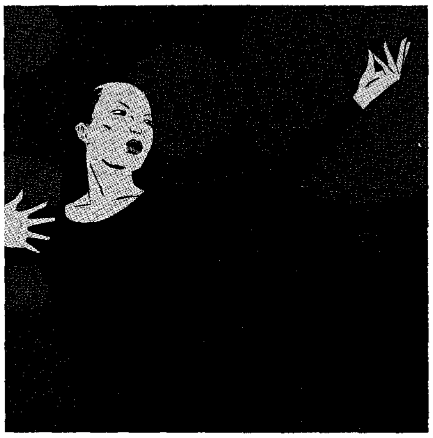
Some fifty years ago, the director Jean Renoir travelled to India, where he made "The River," his first film in Technicolor and his most languid and gorgeous work of cinematic naturalism. The film should be seen on a wide screen, and the Anthology Film Archives is presenting a rare opportunity to do so. (April 23-24; see Movies.)



The Venice Baroque Orchestra performs Handel's 1728 opera "Siroe" at BAM.

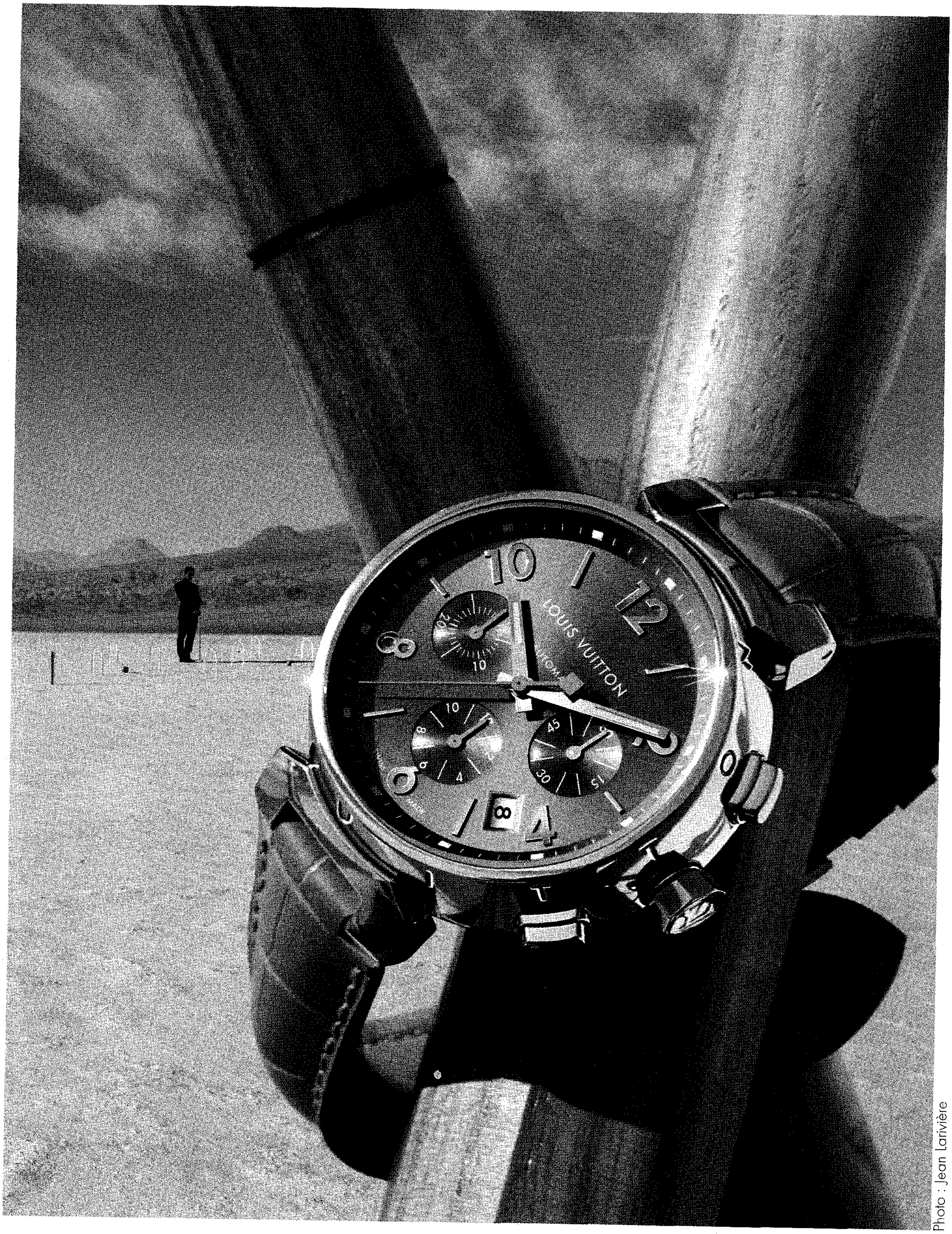


"The River," Jean Renoir's first Technicolor film, from 1951, at Anthology.



ADRIAN TOMINE

The Martha Graham Dance Company comes to City Center.



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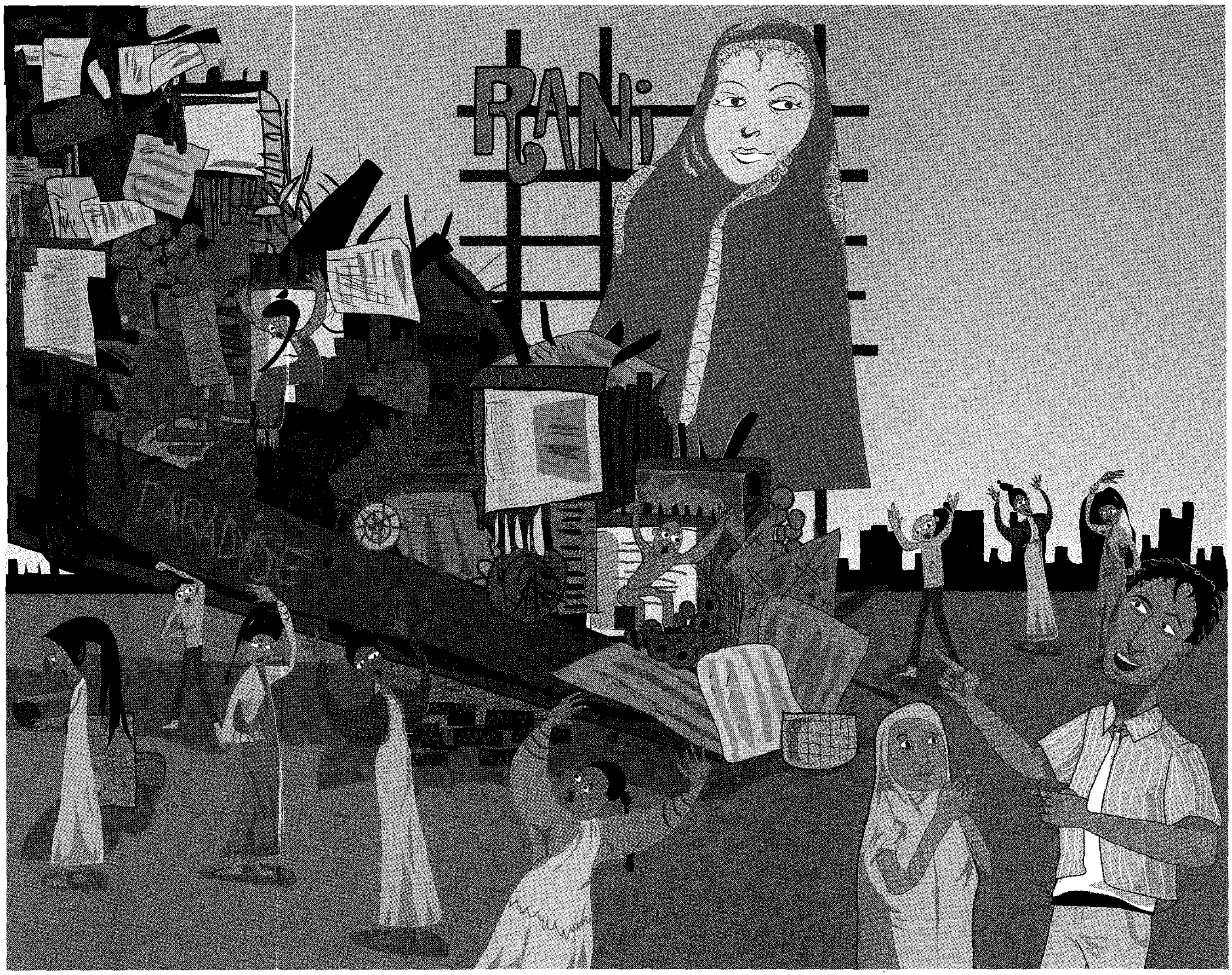
ASSASSINS
The Roundabout Theatre Company presents the first Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical about nine men and women who killed or tried to kill American Presidents. With Neil Patrick Harris as Lee Harvey Oswald, Michael Cerveris as John Wilkes Booth, and Mary Catherine Garrison as Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme. Directed by Joe Mantello. In previews. Opens April 22 at 7. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200.)



A. R. Rahman's musical "Bombay Dreams," a hit in London's West End, is now in previews at the Broadway Theatre.

MAXIMILIAN BODE

BETWEEN US
A kind of contemporary "Big Chill," written by Joe Hortua and directed by Christopher Ashley. With David Harbour, Daphne Rubin-Vega, Kate Jennings Grant, and Bradley White. A Manhattan Theatre Company production. In previews. Opens April 20 at 6:45. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

BIRO
The story of a refugee from Uganda who ends up in a Texas jail cell. Written and performed by Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine. Directed by Peter DuBois. In previews. Opens April 18 at 8. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

BOMBAY DREAMS
A. R. Rahman's lavish musical about an Indian slumdweller who wants to become a Bollywood star, which has been a hit in London for two years, comes to New York. Based on an idea by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Shekhar Kapur, with a book by Thomas Meehan ("Hairspray") and Meera Syal and music by Rahman. In previews. (Broadway, 1681 Broadway, at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

CAROLINE, OR CHANGE
The new musical by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori comes to Broadway after a successful run at the Public. Directed by George C. Wolfe. In previews. (O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

FINIAN'S RAINBOW
Melissa Errico and Malcolm Gets star in a concert adaptation of the musical by Yip Harburg, Fred Saidy, and Burton Lane. Directed by Charlotte Moore. One preview on April 14. Opens April 15 at 7. (Irish Rep, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

GUINEA PIG SOLO
Labyrinth Theatre Company and the Public Theatre present a new play by Brett C. Leonard, set in the present day, about a Hispanic soldier who returns home to New York City from Iraq and goes into a tailspin. John Ortiz, Stephen Adly Guirgis, and Judy Reyes lead the cast. Directed by Ian Belton. Previews begin April 20. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

JUMPERS
Simon Russell Beale and Essie Davis lead the cast in a revival of Tom Stoppard's comic, philosophical murder mystery, from 1972. Directed by David Leveaux. In previews. Opens April 25 at 6:30. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-7171.)

PRYMATE
A new play by Mark Medoff ("Children of a Lesser God"), about two scientists who work with a gorilla that communicates through American Sign Language, comes to Broadway and stars André De Shields and Phyllis Frelich. Directed by Edwin Sherin. Previews begin April 16. (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

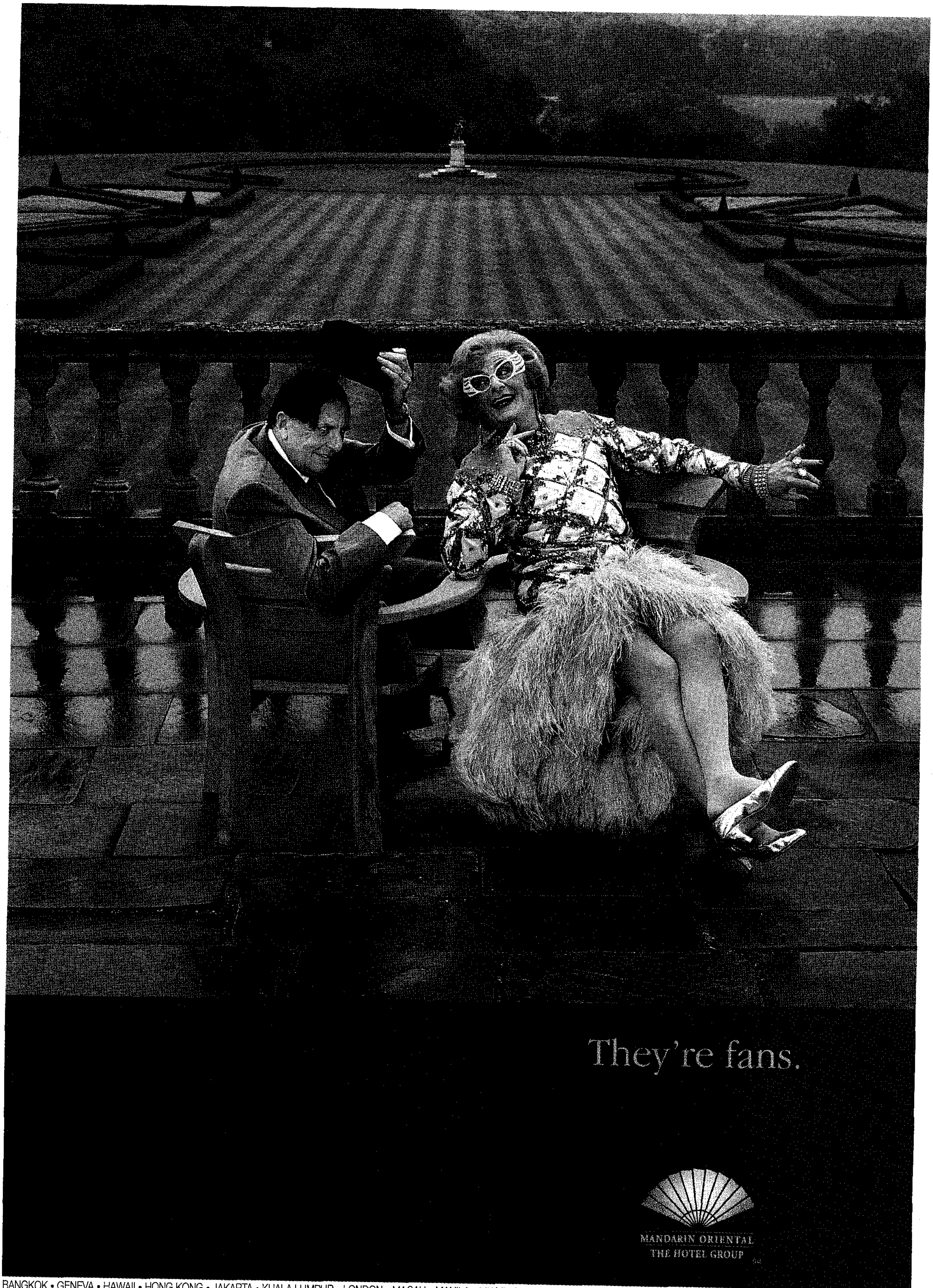
A RAISIN IN THE SUN
Sean (P. Diddy) Combs, Audra McDonald, and Phylicia Rashad star in a revival of Lorraine Hansberry's play about three generations of a family who live under the same roof on the South Side of Chicago. Directed by Kenny Leon. In previews. Opens April 26 at 7. (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

SIXTEEN WOUNDED
A new play by Eliam Kraiem about a friendship between a Jewish baker and a young Palestinian man, with Judd Hirsch, Martha Plimpton, Omar Metwally, and Jan Maxwell. Directed by Garry Hynes. Two previews on April 14. Opens April 15 at 6:30. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

OPENED RECENTLY

BRIDGE & TUNNEL
Sarah Jones, a sort of multicultural mynah bird, lays our mongrel nation before us with gorgeous, pitch-perfect impersonations. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/8/04.) (45 Bleecker Street Theatre, at 45 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100.)

BUG
In this dark new comedy by Tracy Letts, Agnes (Shannon Cochran), hiding out from her violent ex-con ex-husband in an Oklahoma City hotel room, falls for a handsome drifter (Michael Shannon) with a conspiracy theory: he believes the authorities have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planted bugs under his skin. With sterling performances by Cochran and Shannon (both of whom look terrific naked, which they are at length) and by Michael Cullen, as the frightening ex-husband. The director, Dexter Bullard, keeps up the suspense all the way through. (Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St., at Seventh Ave. 212-239-6200.)

EARS ON A BEATLE
This sombre two-person play draws from F.B.I. files documenting the antiwar activities of John Lennon, but the ex-Beatle never actually appears onstage. The playwright explores the relationship between two agents who are assigned to track him: the stern and culturally unaware Howard Ballantine (Dan Lauria) and his young assistant, Daniel McClure (Bill Dawes). The men have their own philosophical and romantic troubles, and a broad subject becomes a sensitive portrait of two lonely hearts. Written and directed by Mark St. Germain. (DR2, at 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

FROM DOOR TO DOOR
A comedy about smothering mothers and single parenthood by James Sherman ("Beau Jest"). Directed by Joe Brancato. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

FROZEN
In Bryony Lavery's extremely well-crafted play, Swoosie Kurtz plays Nancy, a mother who walks about in a stunned silence brought on by the kidnapping and murder of her little girl by a pedophile named Ralph (the brilliant Brían F. O'Byrne). Set in present-day England, the play is essentially a series of monologues describing the locked-in lives of Nancy, Ralph, and a criminologist named Agnetha (Laila Robins), who has come from the United States to deliver lectures on the characteristics of the criminal mind. Directed by Doug Hughes. (3/29/04) (MCC at East Thirteenth Street Theatre, 136 E. 13th St. 212-279-4200.)

HANNAH & MARTIN
Kate Fodor's first play examines the conflict between the political theorist Hannah Arendt and her former lover and teacher, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who joined the Nazi party before the Second World War and never repudiated Nazism. Two excellent actors—David Strathairn, as Heidegger, and George Morfogen, as the philosopher Karl Jaspers—create moments of clarity, but over all the play is a morass of exposition that never quite articulates the questions about forgiveness that Fodor, apparently, thinks it is raising. Directed by Ron Russell. A production of the Epic Theatre Center. (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-279-4200.)

INTIMATE APPAREL
The Roundabout Theatre Company presents a new play by Lynn Nottage, about an African-American lingerie seamstress who puts her business at risk when she marries a mysterious stranger from the Caribbean. Directed by Daniel Sullivan. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

THE JOURNALS OF MIHAIL SEBASTIAN
The first play written by David Auburn since "Proof" is a one-man show drawn from the journals of a Jewish-Romanian novelist and dramatist who lived in Bucharest in the years 1935-44. The performance of Stephen Kunken, as Sebastian, compensates for the script, which seems less an adaptation than a flat transcription. A Keen Company production. Directed by Carl Forsman. (Theatre at 45th Street, 354 W. 45th St. 212-868-4444. Closes April 18.)

MATCH
In a new play by Stephen Belber ("Tape"), starring Frank Langella, Ray Liotta, and Jane Adams, a husband and wife interview a once famous dancer about his past. Directed by Nicholas Martin. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

MR. FOX: A RUMINATION
The final offering of the Signature Theatre Company's Bill Irwin season is a reflection on the life of the celebrated clown George L. Fox (1825-77). Directed by James Houghton. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

MRS. FARNSWORTH
Electoral politics are the focus of a new comedy by A. R. Gurney that stars Sigourney Weaver, John Lithgow, and Danny Burstein. Directed by Jim Simpson. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

MY KITCHEN WARS
A one-woman show in which the preparation of a lobster salad and a Grand Marnier soufflé accompany Betty Fussell's memories of her transformation from passive wife to enlightened writer during her marriage to the Princeton historian Paul Fussell. Performed by the likable Dorothy Lyman, who adapted the play from Ms. Fussell's memoir and is accompanied onstage by the torch singer Melissa Sweeney. Directed by Elinor Renfield. (78th Street Theatre Lab, 236 W. 78th St. 212-868-4444.)

ROAR
In a new play by Betty Shamieh ("Chocolate in Heat"), set in Detroit after the first Gulf War, a Palestinian-American family takes in a relative who has come from Kuwait. Directed by Marion McClinton. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

SARAH, SARAH
In the first act of Daniel Goldfarb's play at the Manhattan Theatre Club, an overbearing Eastern European émigrée, Sarah Grosberg (J. Smith-Cameron), invites her son's eighteen-year-old fiancée to tea at her modest apartment, intending to scupper the engagement. "I want Artie to marry up," she says. The second act, which casts the same actors in different roles, forty years on, shows Artie, now Arthur (Richard Masur), accompanying his thirty-nine-year-old daughter (Smith-Cameron) to China in order to take possession of her adopted daughter, whom she has named after Sarah. Goldfarb, who teeters on the sentimental, engineers some gentle, well-wrought ironies here: the shame of the last generation is healed by the embrace of the new one. Directed by Mark Nelson. (4/12/04) (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

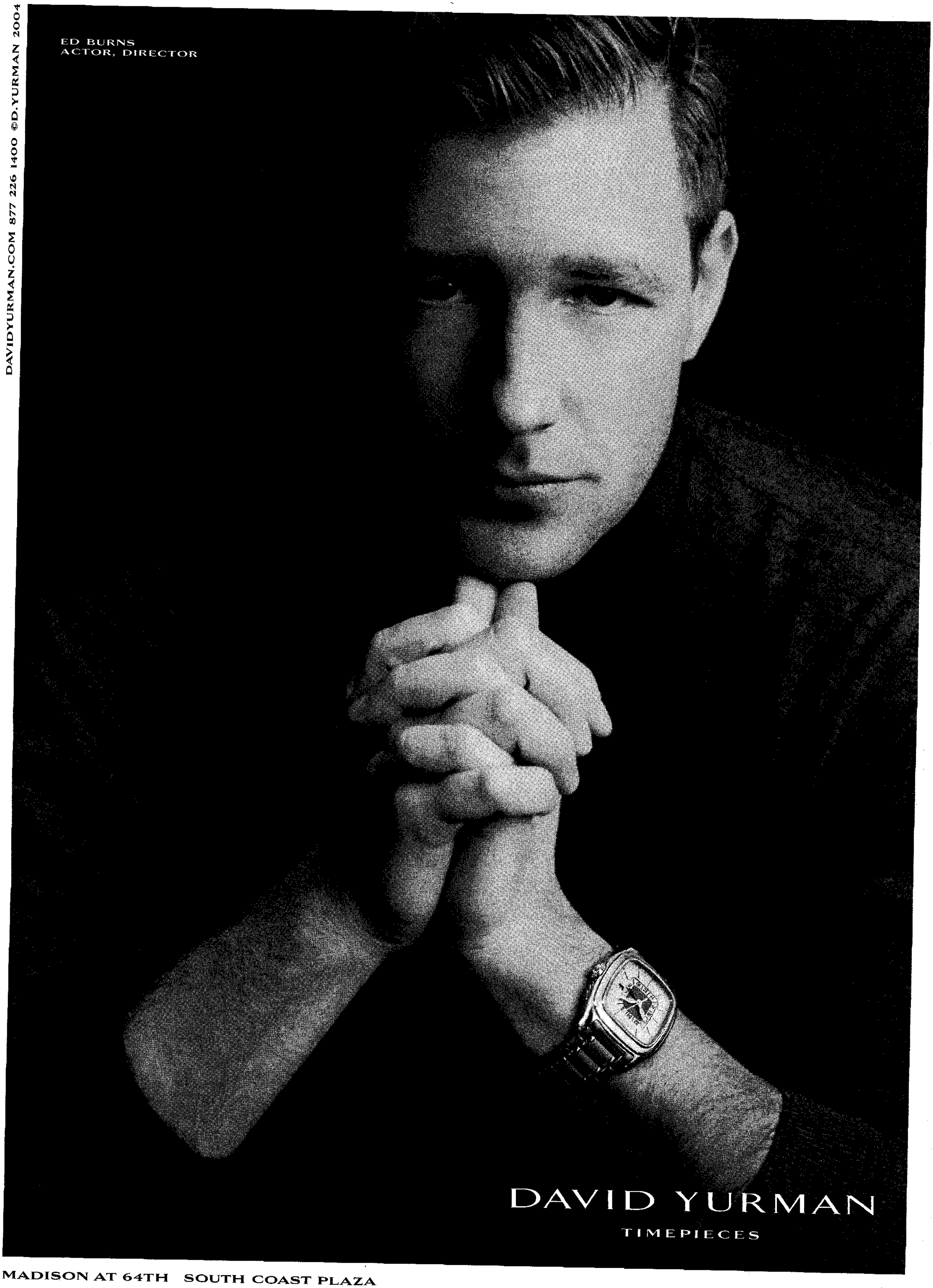
SLY FOX
In 1606, Ben Jonson wrote "Volpone," a play about the kind of con man who would steal your stove, then come back for the smoke. In our current climate of avarice, the director Arthur Penn and the playwright Larry Gelbart decided to crank up their 1976 Broadway fun machine, based on Jonson's play, and see if it would still fly. They have installed a new comic engine—the puckish Richard Dreyfuss as Foxwell J. Sly, a rich man in Gold Rush-era San Francisco—and several sparkplugs, including Bronson Pinchot as Lawyer Craven, who skitters around the stage in a fustian flurry, and the droll, bug-eyed Bob Dishy as the jealous husband Mr. Truckle. Nonetheless, the show takes some time to get airborne. The most glaring impediment to liftoff is the miscasting of Eric Stoltz as Simon Able, Sly's sidekick and shill. Stoltz is a good actor who has wandered into the wrong play. Handsome, suave, and genial, he hasn't a whiff of mischief about him, and the capering Dreyfuss doesn't have enough to play against. (4/12/04) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE TROJAN WOMEN
The Classical Theatre of Harlem presents a revival of Euripides' tragedy, adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser. (HSA Theatre, 645 St. Nicholas Ave., near 141st St. 212-868-4444.)

TWENTIETH CENTURY
The Roundabout Theatre's superbly cast revival of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's screwball comedy from 1934 stars Alec Baldwin as the worn-out impresario Oscar Jaffe and Anne Heche as his former lover and protégée, Lily Garland, who has become an Academy Award-winning star. From adjacent railway couchettes, the two hilariously act out

Annabella Sciorra and Sarita Choudhury star in Betty Shamieh's family drama, "Roar," now playing on Theatre Row.

TOMER HANUKA


ED BURNS
ACTOR, DIRECTOR
DAVID YURMAN
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MADISON AT 64TH SOUTH COAST PLAZA

society's battle between collapse and abundance. Like their characters, Baldwin and Heche have lived out their caprices in public; in addition to their wit and alertness, they bring to the stage their own legends, which lend a particular vividness to their characterizations and make for a rich theatrical chemistry. Slickly directed by Walter Bobbie, with a clever Art Deco set by Jon Lee Beatty, on which Pullman cars slide along the proscenium, creating the illusion of movement. (4/5/04) (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

WELL

Lisa Kron's cunningly written and compelling play is a Pirandello-like examination of chronic illness. She describes it as "a solo show with some other people in it." One of these people is her sick, obese, complaining but beloved mother, Ann (the superb Jayne Houdyshell), whom she both berates and allows to hijack the play. Perhaps because Kron feels guilty for cannibalizing her past, she allows her characters to get the best of her. They protest her scenes, join forces with her mother, and sometimes even attack her. Their disagreements with Kron's authorial voice lend a sense of both modesty and accuracy to her personal history. Directed by Leigh Silverman. (4/12/04) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

Ibsen's last play, directed by Benno Haenel, at the Pearl Theatre Company. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

Balanchine's centennial celebration concludes with a season organized around music, the backbone of his choreography, and isolates the Russian, European, and American strains of his work. Highlights include the elegant "Symphony in C," the jazzy "Four Temperaments," and the show-biz ballet "Who Cares?" Christopher Wheeldon, Boris Eifman, and Peter Martins provide world premières. The company will present more than sixty ballets. ♦ April 27 at 7:30 (French tribute): "Walpurgisnacht Ballet," "Sonatine," "La Valse," and "Symphony in C." (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Through June 27.)

MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY

The company has a two-week season at City Center (see This Week). ♦ April 14 at 7 (gala performance), April 16, April 20, April 22, and April 24 at 8 and April 25 at 2: "The Owl and the Pussycat," "Cave of the Heart," and "Sketches from Chronicle." ♦ April 15, April 17, and April 23 at 8 and April 24 at 2: "Circe," "Hérodiade," "Errand Into the Maze," and "Maple Leaf Rag." ♦ April 21 at 8 and April 25 at 7:30: "Satyric Festival Song," "Deep Song," "Errand Into the Maze," "Circe," and "Sketches from Chronicle." (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

LYON OPERA BALLET

The choreographer Philippe Decouflé specializes in plasticity and the surreal. Inspired by the "Codex Serafinis" of the artist and naturalist Luigi Serafini (a visual encyclopedia of fantastical creatures), the Lyon Opera Ballet's dance-theatre piece "Tricodex" draws on Decouflé's circus training and his experience as a film director. A spectacle with more than a hundred extravagant costumes. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4129. April 20 at 7 and April 22-24 at 7:30.)

NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET

The company presents two rarely performed works in honor of Frederick Ashton and George Balanchine's centenaries: Balanchine's comic "À la Françaix" and the New York première of Ashton's "Capriol Suite," which had its début in London in 1930. Based on dances from the sixteenth century, the suite includes "Basse Danse," "Pavane," "Tordion," "Mattachins," "Pieds en l'Air," and "Bransles." The evening also features works by Antony Tudor, Marco Pelle, and the late John Tares. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-355-6160. April 23-24 at 8.)

MIZUTO ABURA

Masters of straight-faced absurdity, timing, and grace, this quartet of Japanese dancers and mimes uses contemporary music for its madcap antics. "Soup," a work from 2002, moves between a restaurant, various automobiles, and a dreamscape. "An Armchair Theory," a shorter, brighter new work, sends up office doldrums. (Japan Society, 333 E. 47th St. 212-752-3015. April 16-17 at 7:30.)

TABLES FOR TWO

THE SPOTTED PIG

314 W. 11th St. (212-620-0393)—An inspired collection of food illustrations and a motley array of pig figurines clutter this British "gastropub" (is there a *more* dyspeptic-sounding word?). In the restaurant's gastro half, April Bloomfield, a young chef who trained at Chez Panisse and has the know-how with roasted vegetables to show for it, has created a pleasantly unfocussed menu, good for sampling. There's chicken-liver "parfait" on potato bread, a plate of *bresaola*—borrowed from the repertoire of Mario Batali, who is one of the backers—and an especially tasty roast-pumpkin salad. The appetizer not to miss is the *gnudi,* which Bloomfield developed while working at the River Café in London. It's a kind of pasta-less dumpling of sheep's-milk ricotta fried golden brown in crispy sage and butter.

Skirt steak is made exciting by a curious inversion: it's arranged around a mound of fresh horseradish so big it makes the meat look like the condiment. Decent veal kidneys and a Roquefort burger are among the entrées, but anyone hoping that shepherd's pie will break out as downtown's new macaroni and cheese will be disappointed. The shepherd's pie at your average Irish bar is less bland, and will leave you more money for beer.

Speaking of beer, Brooklyn Brewery's specially made Spotted Pig Bitter is worth a try. The bartender, who wears a houndstooth cap and has twin red star tattoos peeking out from low-rise jeans, will offer to pour you a taste (let her—sometimes the brew is off). The press of the crowd at the bar could be nerve-wracking if the friendly staff didn't make a point of treating everyone like a regular. Later in the evening, the place thins out a bit, which makes it possible to linger over dessert without feeling guilty. The selection is refreshingly plain: a hard-core chocolate cake drenched in crème fraîche, a wedge of strong ginger cake, a plate of Colston Basset Stilton.

In a restaurant this size, one party can completely change the mood. At midnight on a recent Tuesday, a high-spirited gang of beauties blew in with their boyfriends, including one character in a double-breasted suit carrying a scuffed leather violin case. They lit up the whole room. (Open for dinner Tuesdays through Sundays. Entrées $13-$19.)

—*Owen Phillips*

THE WHIRLING DERVISHES OF TURKEY

In a ritual devised by the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Rumi, the dervishes whirl in an attempt to fling off worldly diversions and achieve oneness with the divine. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 212-545-7536. April 24 at 8.)

DONNA UCHIZONO COMPANY

At the beginning of Uchizono's "Butterflies from My Hand," Hristoula Harakas, folded in upon herself, hangs from the ceiling by a strip of red fabric. She slowly snips away at the cloth with a pair of scissors until she falls to the floor. Then she and three other dancers float about, as if blown by wind. Guy Yarden supplies the electronic score. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 14-17 and April 21-24 at 7 and April 25 at noon.)

NORTH CAROLINA DANCE THEATRE

The company from Charlotte presents Alvin Ailey's "The River," Nicolo Fonte's "Brave!," and Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux's "Shindig," accompanied by the North Carolina bluegrass band the Greasy Beans. (The Joyce, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 13 and April 15 at 7:30, April 14 and April 16 at 8, April 17 at 2 and 8, and April 18 at 2.)

JOYCE GALA

Dancers from City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and San Francisco Ballet join modern dancers from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Momix, DanceBrazil, and other companies in an evening of performances benefitting the Joyce. (Joyce, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-691-9740. April 26 at 7.)

TINA CROLL & COMPANY

Croll is a veteran of the sixties dance scene, but her company is fresh-faced and young. Their lack of polish is leavened by eagerness and charm. This season the choreographer presents two new works: "Hasten Forward Dancing," set to the music of Arvo Pärt, and "Burning Lake," a solo set to Ethiopian jazz. "Balkan Dreams II" reprises sections from last year's raucous celebration of Macedonian music. Croll herself performs her 1994 meditation on Philip Glass, "Was I What?!!" (Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer St. 212-334-7479. April 15-18 at 8.)

DANCES PATRELLE

Francis Patrelle marks his company's fifteenth anniversary with a première, "Glad to Be Unhappy," accompanied by two singers and live piano. There are also revivals of "Madame X" and "Country Dances/The Hunt." The American Ballet Theatre principal Marcelo Gomes and the soloist Sandra Brown are featured. (Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, 68th St. at Park Ave. 212-772-4448. April 22 at 7 and April 23-24 at 8.)

"THE KEIGWIN KABARET"

The paunchy, punchy choreographer Larry Keigwin hosts an evening of dance, performance art, and burlesque, featuring Nicole Wolcott, Bradford Scobie, Julian Barnett, Hilary Clark, and Larissa Velez. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 15-16 at 8:30.)

E-MOVES 5

The festival at Aaron Davis Hall in Harlem, now in its fifth year, highlights artists of color, whether they are E-merging (program A), E-volving (program B), or E-stablished (program C). Curated by Felicia A. Swoope, the season showcases more than a dozen choreographers, including Camille A. Brown, Christal N. Brown, and Gregory King, and also features the Complexions Contemporary Ballet, which performs its first full-length ballet, "Anthem." (Convent Ave. between W. 134th and W. 135th Sts. 212-650-7100. Program A: April 16 and April 23 at 8 and April 17 at 2. Program B: April 17 at 8, April 18 at 3, and April 24 at 2. Program C: April 18 at 7, April 24 at 8, and April 25 at 3.)

"FRESH TRACKS"

This year, Dance Theatre Workshop's series devoted to up-and-coming choreographers includes Brandon Albright, Johanna Hegenscheidt, Marion Ramirez, Leonardo Smith, Jeremy Wade, and two women (Colleen Hooper and Kate Garroway) who bill themselves as the Roosters and present a comic portrait of New York City night life in the piece "Two Chicks Walk Into a Bar." (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 20 and April 27 at 7.)

NIGHT LIFE

CONCERTS

ZANKEL HALL

The Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso (see Concerts below) curates a program in Carnegie Hall's intimate underground performance space. April 14 at 8:30: **Banda AfroReggae,** a group from Rio de Janeiro, mixes rap and funk with samba and other Brazilian styles. April 15 at 8:30: **Mart'nália,** the daughter of the samba singer Martinho da Vila, sings music by Baden Powell and Vinícius de Moraes and presents a tribute to her father. April 18 at 7:30: **Virgínia Rodrigues,** a former manicurist and wedding singer from Salvador de Bahia who was discovered a few years back by Veloso. (212-247-7800.)

N.E.R.D.

Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo are the hit-making producers known as the Neptunes, and they've made a fortune laying down beats for everyone from No Doubt to Jay-Z. But they also have, along with the rapper-vocalist Shay, a band. Two years ago, their début album, "In Search of . . .," won countless fans with its slaphappy mix of hip-hop and rock and roll. They're back with more of the same on their new release, "Fly or Die." The difference this time is that Hugo and Williams play the guitars and drums themselves, with mixed results. Fortunately, on this tour, they've brought along Spymob, the musicians who helped them record their first album. The adventurous L.A. rappers the **Black Eyed Peas** open the proceedings. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 212-307-7171. April 15 at 7:30.)

KENNY BARRON

The dean of modern mainstream jazz piano settles into the Kaplan Penthouse for three nights. (Rose Building, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. April 15-17 at 8.)

DAMIEN RICE

Last year this Irish singer was playing tiny downtown bars. This year he's headlining a large uptown theatre. Credit is due to his moving performances and his début album, "O," a collection of understated gems. With the **Frames.** (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 212-307-7171. April 16 at 8.)

CAETANO VELOSO

The wondrous Brazilian singer-songwriter can bewitch an audience with just his acoustic guitar and his voice. He's playing two nights at Carnegie Hall, one solo and the second with **David Byrne.** (212-247-7800. April 16-17 at 8.)

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE

The institute's fifth annual Greek Festival runs April 16-17. The opening night features **Maryo, Giouli Tsiro,** and others singing *rembetika*, or Greek blues, from the first half of the twentieth century. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St.) The following evening **Masters of the Psaltic Art,** Greece's most famous Byzantine chorus, makes its United States début in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. (Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. Both shows at 8.) April 18 at 7: A night of *qawwali* music from Pakistan with **Farid Ayaz Qawwal & Brothers,** whose performance here last month was cancelled because of visa problems. (Symphony Space.) April 23 at 8: The Senegalese group **Orchestra Baobab** anticipates summer with languid harmonies, melodic drumming, and inventive guitar riffs. (Skirball Center, New York University, 566 La Guardia Pl., at Washington Sq. S.) April 24 at 8: The **Whirling Dervishes of Turkey** (see Dance). (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. For more information about all the shows, call 212-545-7536.)

"NEW MUSIC, NEW YORK + 25"

In 1979 the Kitchen brought together **Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros,** and **Robert Ashley** for a downtown music festival called "New Music, New York." This reunion concert includes old works, such as Reich's hypnotic "Drumming, Part 1," as well as new ones—Anderson's piece for voice, violin, and electronics and Glass's work with Foday Musa Suso, a virtuoso of the Gambian kora (a twenty-one-string lute). (Town Hall. For more information, call 212-255-5793. April 27 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

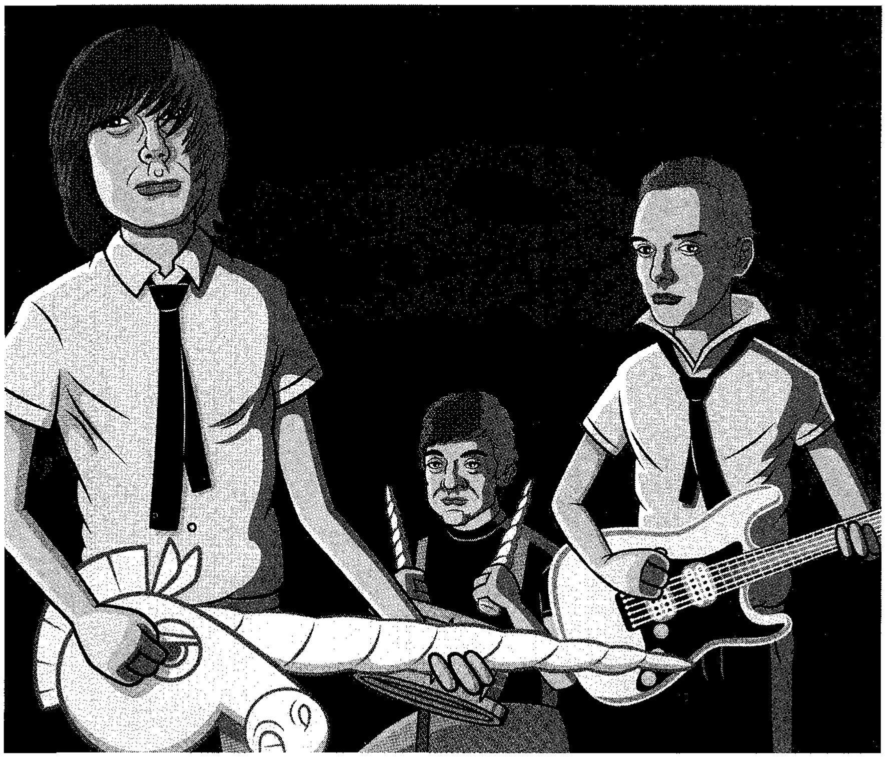
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—April 14: The funky R. & B. group the **Average White Band** belongs to another country, Scotland, and another time, the early seventies. April 17: The "Classic Albums Live" series features musicians re-creating Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run." April 18: **Morbid Angel** is a death-metal band that came galloping out of Florida in the mid-eighties and hasn't looked back since. With New York's own, similarly inclined band **Suffocation.** April 19: Reggae with **Israel Vibration.** April 20: **Aretha Franklin.** The Queen of Soul makes an extremely rare club appearance. April 21-22: **Tower of Power** reprises "What Is Hip?" April 26: **UFO,** a heavy-metal band from England, has been around since the late sixties. Its massive popularity in Europe has never quite translated to the States.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—April 14: The British trio **Muse** swaddles the voice of their bombastic front man, Matthew Bellamy, in pounding keyboards, clanging guitars, and bullet-train drums. Their latest album, "Absolution," is a collection of complex, volatile songs of vein-popping intensity. April 15 and April 20: Finland's gloriously histrionic goth-rock band **H.I.M.** (His Infernal Majesty) wallows in melodrama to a degree that makes Leonard Cohen sound peppy. April 16: Scott Herren, who produces dense, frenetic hip-hop albums under the name Prefuse 73, joins the Catalan singer Eva Puyuelo Muns in **Savath and Savalas.** They create a creaky, tropical pop sound, and they'll be aided here by a band that includes the drummer Susie Ibarra. With the Argentinean vocalist **Juana Molina.** April 21-22: **Tortoise,** the revered and reviled post-rock experimental ensemble from Chicago, has a new album, "It's All Around You." April 23: The melodic folk pop of **Mason Jennings.** April 24: **Guided by Voices** cranks up the guitars. April 27-29: The anguished Omaha-based rock band **Cursive.**

IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—April 16-18: **Stereolab** delivers lush and surprisingly human electronica. April 24: Berlin's maverick band **Einstürzende Neubauten** (German for "Collapsing New Buildings") has a fondness for power tools, onstage destruction, and harrowing noise. But they are also capable of exquisite subtlety, and their use of unorthodox instruments has always been groundbreaking, sometimes literally. April 26-27: The pride of the Pacific Northwest, **Sleater-Kinney.**



The Unicorns, from Montreal, stop by Southpaw on April 14.

MICHAEL WELDON

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—April 15: **Daniel Johnston,** a deeply troubled and highly regarded singer-songwriter. April 17: The **Glands** make delightfully breezy pop reminiscent of the Kinks. They share the bill with **Azita,** who grew up in Iran and then attended the Art Institute of Chicago, where she came of age as a rock bassist in a band named the Scissor Girls. On her own she's switched to the piano, and she sings jazz-influenced pop songs in a deep, entrancing voice.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—April 15: **Valley of the Giants,** a Canadian indie-rock supergroup featuring members of Broken Social Scene, Do Make Say Think, and Godspeed You! Black Emperor. With the strings and drums of New York's own cello-and-violin-fed quartet **Tarantula,** and the Weimaresque cabaret of Boston's **Dresden Dolls.** April 24-25: The **Gourds,** who hail from Austin, were lauded by the late Texas honky-tonk and blues master Doug Sahm.

NORTHSIX

66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—April 18: The **Glands** and **Azita** (see the Knitting Factory.) April 24: The two women in **Bitch and Animal** are a pair of self-described "queeps" (that's short for "queer people") who play the ukulele, violin, and *djembe* while serving up a folksy pro-sex message.

SOUTHPAW

125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—April 14: The **Unicorns,** an exuberant, lo-fi pop band out of Montreal, use beer cans, masks, and puppets in their shows. April 17: The quiet and wholesome folk pop of the **Innocence Mission.** April 22: The all-girl queercore trio the **Butchies,** known for mixing elements of disco, rock, and folk music, flirt with pop on their new album, "Make Yr Life."

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

CARLYLE HOTEL

Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound murals, and, through May 1, **Maria Friedman,** a British theatre star who brings along two piano accompanists and a wealth of West End experience (she will co-star in Andrew Lloyd Webber's upcoming "The Woman in White").

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through April 24: The Broadway veteran **Patti Lupone.**

IRIDIUM

1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Through April 15: The trumpeter **Freddie Hubbard** celebrates his sixty-sixth birthday with the support of the **New Jazz Composers Octet.** April 16-18: The **Three Altos** features Gary Bartz, Sonny Fortune, and Vincent Herring on saxophone. April 20-22: The **Cookers** is a hard-bop band that joins the veterans Eddie Henderson, James Spaulding, Pete LaRoca Sims, and George Cables with younger devotees like Craig Handy. April 23-25: The trombonist **Curtis Fuller** celebrates his seventieth birthday in the company of a hard-bop unit that features the trumpeter **Wallace Roney** and the drummer **Louis Hayes.** Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Through April 18: The **Jazz Composers Collective Festival.** This annual gathering, which started three years ago, provides an illuminating overview of the city's forward-thinking bands. April 13: Ted Nash & Odeon. April 14: The Ron Horton quintet and the Michael Blake trio. April 15: The Frank Kimbrough trio. April 16: Ben Allison & Medicine Wheel. Later on April 16 and April 17: "Lucky Charms: The Music of Lucky Thompson." April 17: The Michael Blake quintet. April 18: Ben Allison's Peace Pipe and Ted Nash's Still Evolved. April 21-22: The **Clayton Hamilton Jazz Orchestra,** a staple of the Los Angeles scene since the late eighties, makes a rare East Coast appearance. April 23-25: The eighty-six-year-old pianist **Sir Charles Thompson** is a demi-legend of the swing-to-bop era who worked with Coleman Hawkins and Charlie Parker; his old-school accompanists are the drummer **Eddie Locke** and the bassist **Earl May.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Through April 18: The pianist **Bill Charlap** is confident and lyrical on the new CD with his trio, "Somewhere: The Songs of Leonard Bernstein." The bassist **Peter Washington** and the drummer **Kenny Washington** provide magic-carpet support. April 20-25: The **Steve Wilson** quartet. The alto saxophonist and flute player Wilson, best known for his work with Chick Corea, breaks out of the sideman ghetto. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-879-5500)—W. B. Yeats called it the "artifice of eternity"—the icons, metalwork, carvings, and textiles of Byzantine culture. Christian and Islamic traditions were melded into an aesthetic of illumination, gilding, fresco, and mosaic that influenced the masters of the Italian and Northern Renaissance. Crowded with sombre Madonnas and lean Christs in red robes, **"Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)"** includes treasures like the "Man of Sorrows" reliquary, filled with bits of saints tied in silk bags. The Byzantine influence on Europe is illustrated with masterpieces by van Eyck and van der Weyden. Through July 4. ♦ A jewel of a show, **"Klee: The Late Years"** vivifies a great artist whose prestige has suffered from generations of imitators who probably no longer know who they're imitating. Twenty-four top-drawer little paintings, watercolors, and drawings from 1925 to 1940—when Paul Klee worked with the Bauhaus in Dessau, taught in Düsseldorf, and then took refuge from the Nazis in his native Bern—explore the range of his talent, from glyphic cartooning to transfer printing, sprayed watercolor, slathered plaster, and other wizardries that once made him the Merlin of modern art. Through June 27. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA QNS)
33rd St. at Queens Blvd., Long Island City (212-708-9400)—**"Roth Time,"** a gargantuan retrospective of the late, underknown German-Swiss artist Dieter Roth, holds sway at MOMA and in a smaller show at its affiliate, P.S. 1. Imagine Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, and Joseph Beuys rolled into one and thrown against a wall. Roth emerged after the Second World War as a gifted draftsman à la Paul Klee, proceeded through phases of inventive geometric and kinetic work, and then, influenced by Jean Tinguely and Fluxus, became an installational wild man, using innumerable mediums (frequently, cast chocolate) to colonize the world with a kind of participatory narcissism. Did Roth liberate his considerable talent, or did he trash it? Through June 7. ♦ **"Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990"** opens April 16. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 10 to 5, and Friday evenings until 7:45.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated)"** fills the museum with classic minimalist and post-minimalist art of the last half-century, exalting what is still the chief aesthetic of our age. Emphasizing "reductive" sensibility—a qualifier rarely used since the nineteen-sixties—the curators smooth over theoretical antagonisms between sculpture (Judd, Andre, Flavin) and painting (Kelly, Ryman, Marden), thus giving weight to latter-day hybrid modes (Richter, Ray, Gober). Californian hedonism (Irwin, Turrell, McCracken) registers as strongly as phenomenologi-

A work from Philip-Lorca diCorcia's "Cuba Libre" series, in "Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990," at MOMA.

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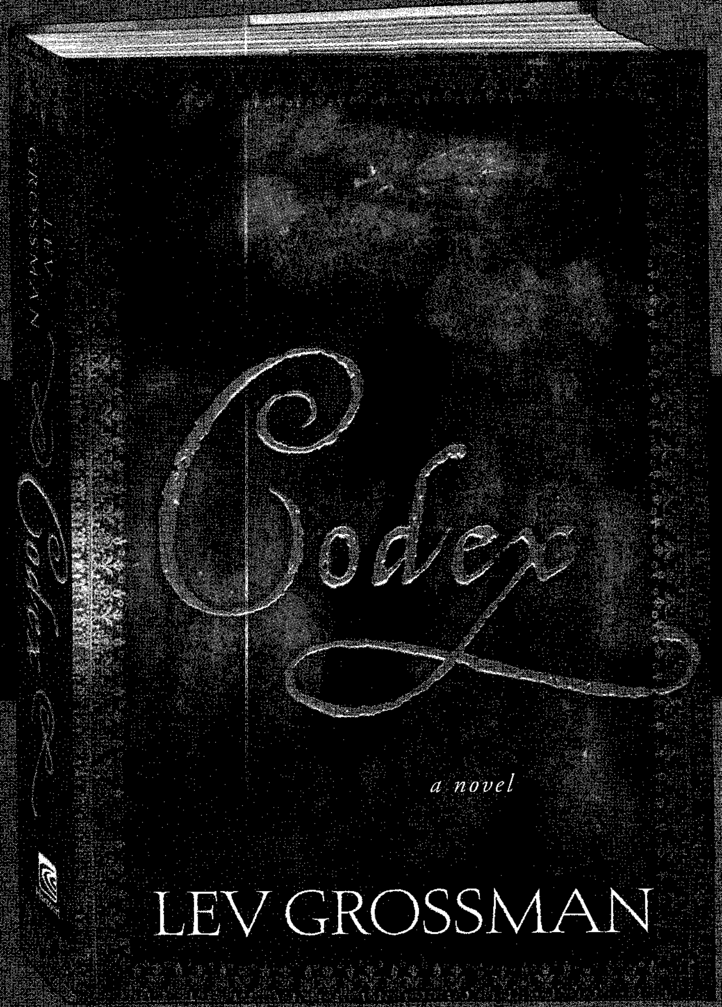

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—*The New York Times Book Review*

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—Otto Penzler, *The New York Sun*

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cal tough stuff (Morris, Serra, Nauman). Sumptuously seductive for all its austerities, the show reminds us that minimalism brought about a revolution in the decorative arts. Through May 19. ♦ Preëxisting art works are made anew in **"Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice."** Most of the work, from Mary Flanagan's "[phage]," a program that mines hard-drive data to create images, to the Josef Albers-inspired "Color Panel," by John Simon, Jr., is computer based, and risks obsolescence as technology advances. An exception is Robert Morris's "Site," a stark 1964 performance that was restaged for film. Through May 16. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3676)—A startlingly good Biennial banishes the gloom that has long beset the Whitney's programs on contemporary art. Painting and drawing reign. Handmade pictures exercise a gravitational tug on practically everything in the show, including sculptures, installations, videos, photographs, films, and digital animation. Paintings by younger artists like Elizabeth Peyton, Laura Owens, and Lecia Dole-Recio exchange energy with those by veterans like David Hockney, Mel Bochner, and Robert Mangold. Video installation emerges as a fully mature art form in strong works by Catherine Sullivan, Craigie Horsfield, Eve Sussman, and Slater Bradley. Installational hybrids of painting and sculpture—dominant in the last decade—show signs of exhaustion; an exception is a delightful neo-psychedelic disco by a group called assume vivid astro focus. Through May 30. (Open Wednesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 W. 53rd St. (212-265-1040)—**"Talking Quilts."** Through Aug. 1. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 7:30.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Arcadia and Metropolis: Masterworks of German Expressionism from the Nationalgalerie Berlin."** Through June 7. (Open Fridays, 11 to 9, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

GALLERIES–UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

BURGOYNE DILLER
Cubism gave Diller ideas about planar and linear elements in space, and his studies with the legendary teacher Hans Hofmann shaped his simple and emphatic use of color. But it was the compositions of Piet Mondrian that gave Diller the basis for his lifelong project. This selection of work from the nineteen-sixties includes oils, crayon and pencil drawings, and sculptures in wood, Masonite, and Formica, all methodically working through Diller's red-yellow-blue grid. Through May 8. (Rosenfeld, 24 W. 57th St. 212-247-0082.)

ALEXANDER LIBERMAN
Liberman's protean talent as a magazine genius—he became the creative director of *Vogue* in 1941 and later of all the Condé Nast magazines—worked against him as a painter. Although he showed regularly in top New York galleries, Liberman, who died in 1999, got less recognition than he deserved. His breakthrough series of circle paintings, several of which are shown here, were executed between 1949 and 1962, anticipating minimal art by more than a decade. The austere yet indelible images look as though the paint on them were still wet. Through April 24. (Ameringer & Yohe, 20 W. 57th St. 212-445-0051.)

A. R. PENCK
A German painter whose electric colors, scrawling lines, and naïvely drawn figures bridge the gap between early-twentieth-century Expressionists and contemporary artists like Elizabeth Peyton. "Dres-

den," a carnivalesque composition of multihued figures, is Penck's most flagrant nod to Die Brücke, the German Expressionist movement founded in Dresden in 1905; further evidence of this debt can be found by looking at the Noldes and Kirchners at the nearby Neue Galerie. Through April 17. (Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

ALEXIS SMITH
This show of new political agitprop by the veteran Los Angeles *bricoleuse* takes its title from a wall painting that deploys three words—"Lust/Dust/Rust"—in the swoony manner of Robert Indiana's "Love." What the handsome, vaguely angry exercise proves is hard to decide. A series of preciously framed collages of patriotic imagery is even more baffling. Pairing the Goya title "The Sleep of Reason Creates Monsters" with Norman Rockwell's "Freedom from Fear"—in which Mom and Dad watch over their sleeping kids—suggests a desolating pitch of rage at American culture, and yet the work is blandly decorative and as neat as a pin. Through April 24. (Artemis Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444.)

Short List

GEORGE AULT
Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 212-752-1223. Through April 24.

DAVID HOCKNEY
Richard Gray, 1018 Madison Ave., at 78th St. 212-472-8787. Through April 23.

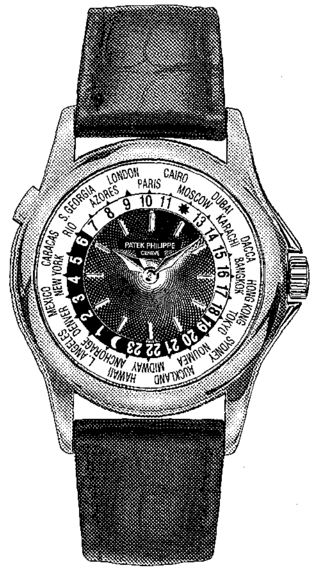
GALLERIES—CHELSEA

NATALIE CHARKOW HOLLANDER
Roughly carved reliefs in limestone, sandstone, marble, and clay. Some put images by painters such as Matisse, Poussin, and Tintoretto into three dimensions. Others suggest paintings viewed from the back, with the foregrounds carved out like a honeycomb. Through May 1. (Lohin Geduld, 531 W. 25th St. 212-675-2656.)

MARTIN HONERT
Enchanting installations by a German artist. Sculptural ensembles of knights at war and Santa Claus beset by a devil give piquant form to drawings that Honert made between the ages of eight and ten. In "Lantern," life-size photographs of the artist in bed, watching an image of the Earth on television, are displayed in a ten-foot cubical light box. The photos are enhanced with raised black contours, which give them a Lichtenstein-like panache, and the room's ceiling opens to a starry sky. Through April 24. (Marks, 523 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

DONALD JUDD
Judd called his signature boxes "specific objects," and the term makes particular sense in this inspired grouping of "Single Stacks," from the sixties. Each work is a formal variation on a template—a two-by-two-foot box mounted at eye level. One is lozenge shaped, one is made of speckled gray galvanized iron; light bounces off a copper box and penetrates the red fluorescent Plexiglas interior of another, creating a shimmering triangle on the wall. Through May 28. (Van de Weghe, 521 W. 23rd St. 212-929-6633.)

PETER WEGNER
Organizational systems—cartography, language, the Dewey decimal system—are bent to the breaking point in this mini-retrospective. *National Geographic* maps and library catalogue cards are chopped into little squares that form new compositions; shades of blue pigment applied to two-by-fours mimic the rigid spectrums of paint-store samples. Wegner's efforts are sometimes pretentious, as when he cuts the center out of a book with a page reading "Linguistic Significance of Meanings of Basic Color Terms." He does better when he lets color speak for itself, which it does in the immense stacks of colored paper in "Wall-to-Wall Reds" and "Floor-to-Ceiling Blues." Through June 18. (Bohen Foundation, 415 W. 13th St. 212-414-4575.)



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Short List

DINH Q. LÊ
P.P.O.W., 555 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.
Through April 17.

MELIK OHANIAN
Lambert, 564 W. 25th St. 212-242-3611.
Through April 24.

ANDY WARHOL
Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave. 212-563-4474.
Through April 17.

GALLERIES–DOWNTOWN

CARROLL DUNHAM
Dunham reinforces the notion of drawing as a diaristic activity. Work in black wax crayon on white paper has an architectural quality, while some pink-and-black acrylics recall Motherwell's sombre elegies to the Spanish Civil War. On the whole, these drawings are less jocular than Dunham's previous work. Through April 24. (Nolan/Eckman, 560 Broadway. 212-925-6190.)

EDITH ISAAC-ROSE
Paintings and drawings that channel a bewildered rage at the distribution of political power. Malevolent groups of jackals, bears, and wolves dressed in business suits are gathered around tables modelled on Leonardo's "Last Supper." A pair of more human conspirators have devil-red skin. Through April 17. (Kind, 136 Greene St. 212-925-1200.)

Short List

ERRÓ
Grey Art Gallery, 100 Washington Sq. E.
212-998-6780. Through July 17.

CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI
Maccarone, 45 Canal St. 212-431-4977.
Through May 2.

GALLERIES–BROOKLYN

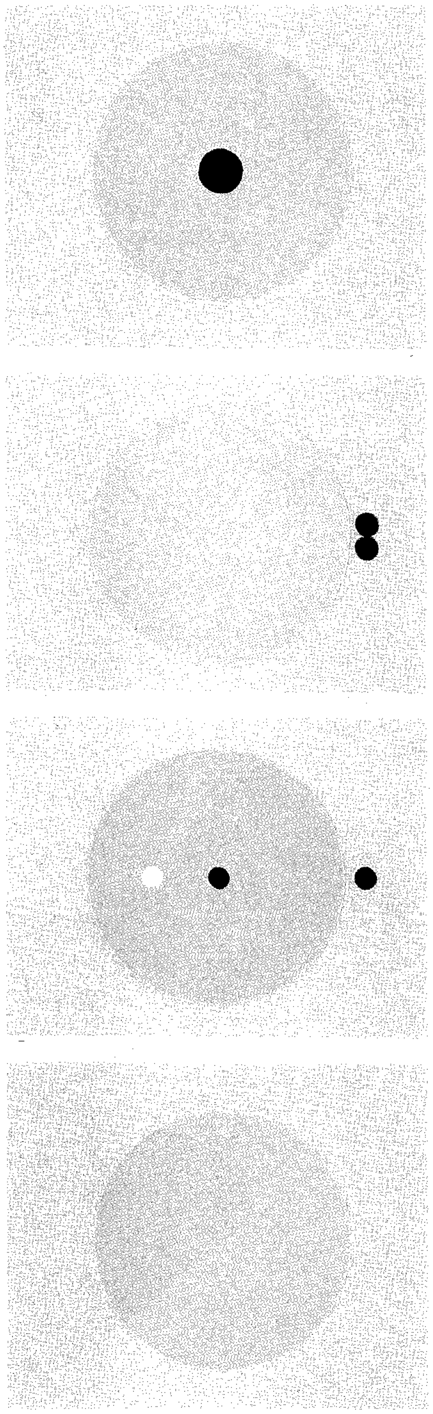
JANE FINE / REED ANDERSON
The titles of these concurrent shows—"After Sugar Time" and "Crystal Horizon," respectively—have druggy implications, which seems appropriate to Fine's deceptively cheerful acrylics on wood panels and Anderson's elaborately painted and perforated works on paper. Through April 19. (Pierogi, 177 N. 9th St. 718-599-2144.)

THE ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION
In a video of what seems to be a trade-show demonstration, three women in white gowns and headphones examine a gutted codfish. They open an attaché case full of viscera, which they put in the fish and—through the magic of reversed film—"seal" with a kitchen knife. In other pieces, the ladies—Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir, Jóni Jónsdóttir, and Eirún Sigurdardóttir—strum guitars and eat hot dogs. Not unenjoyable, but silly. Through April 26. (Jack the Pelican, 487 Driggs Ave. 718-782-0183.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

PETER BIALOBRZESKI
Bialobrzeski's big, color-leached photographs of Hong Kong, Bangkok, Shanghai, and Kuala Lumpur offer surprisingly intimate views of megalopolises. In one, a squat house cowers between a low-slung, cinder-block apartment building and a street transformed into a river of neon. A cluster of apartment buildings blot out white sky; a condominium is wedged into a space above an overpass and a muddy canal; a group of Malaysians cool their feet in a vast wading pool in the shadow of the Petronas Towers, the world's tallest buildings. Through May 15. (Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 212-397-3930.)

EIKOH HOSOE
Erotic tableaux by a Japanese master photographer whose long career has been defined by an interest in sex and theatricality. For this new work, which is, uncharacteristically, in color, Hosoe projected slides of lusty seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints onto the (mostly naked) bodies of Butoh dancers. He then photographed the scenes, with lush and sensual results. The dancers are bathed in images of flowered kimonos, great plumes of pubic hair, and dramatic pudendal mounds. You have to study some of the pictures for a while to figure out exactly what is going on, but cunnilingus and female masturbation are recurring themes. The prints are mounted on aluminum and framed against black suède. Through April 24. (Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)



Works by Alexander Liberman at Ameringer & Yohe (see Art).

EUGENE RICHARDS
Their people in Richards's sharp, intense photographs tend to be poor, crazy, blind, sick, or dead. Their pain is almost unrelenting. The pictures here, gathered from three decades of work, show off an aggressive style as tough as the subjects. The images that linger are the least confrontational: a very old woman at a Mexican mental institution, Robert Frank and his troubled son, Richards's father at his wife's grave. Through May 8. (Leica, 670 Broadway. 212-777-3051.)

"ART HISTORY"
Not so very long ago, photography languished in the long, deep shadow cast by painting. Now, of course, painting owes as much to photography as the other way around. This group show focusses on the way photographers have borrowed painterly aesthetics. In some cases, the connection is obvious—David Seidner and Loretta Lux's portraits, for example, clearly take their cues from Ingres and Raphael. But the most engaging works on view are those that treat painting's legacy with wit and irreverence: Eve Sussman's restaging of Velasquez's "Las Meninas"; Sharon Core's exacting re-creations of Wayne Thiebaud's swirled-icing cakes; Vik Muniz's version of an early Rembrandt self-portrait, done in chocolate sauce. Through April 24. (Yancey Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

Short List

ANDREA MODICA
Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070.
Through April 17.

ZWELETHU MTHETHWA
Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 212-645-1701.
Through April 17.

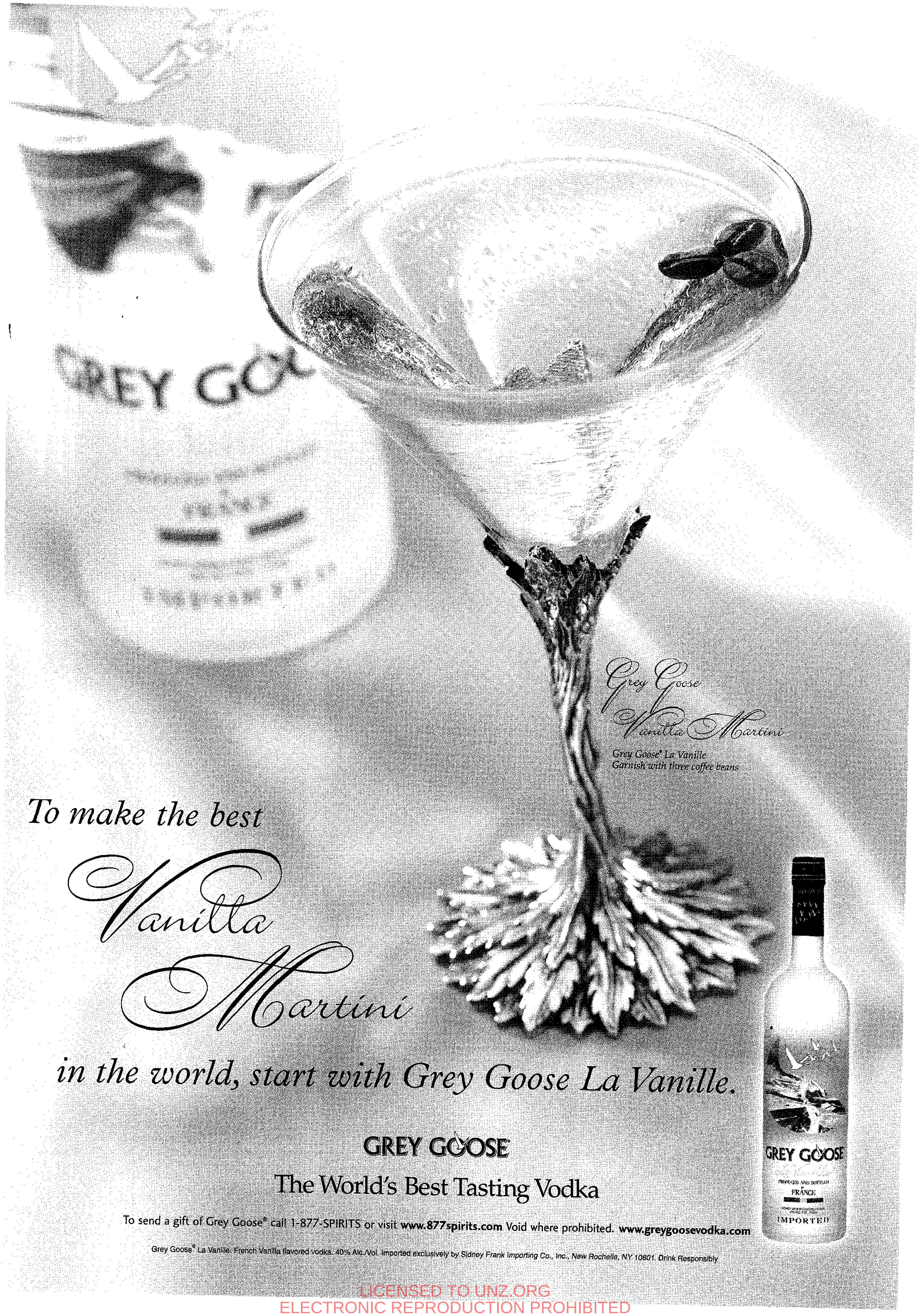
PATTI SMITH
Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 212-366-4774.
Through April 24.

ALEC SOTH
Milo, 552 W. 24th St. 212-414-0370.
Through April 24.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
April 16 at 10:15 A.M. and 2: In a heavily stylized eighteenth-century German tapestry—the marquee item in this sale of Continental furniture and decorative art works—the emperor of China sits before a row of visiting dignitaries and courtiers, distracted by the unexpected arrival of a princess in a golden chair. One can find among the other lots a pair of Spanish silver-mounted armchairs from the nineteenth century and Italian neoclassical consoles circa 1780. ♦ April 23 at 10:15 A.M.: The house's first New York sale of Russian art is a whirl of color and imagination. Beginning modestly with a classically calm "Vue de la Forteresse de St. Petersbourg" (1811), by one Johann Wilhelm Barth, the show continues with such works as Arkhipov's "Girl from Lesnoye" (a blaze of red, green, and orange from 1929), Aivasovsky's desperate seascape "The Survivors" (from 1878, hidden from public view for more than a century), and a selection of intimate works by those three stars of the Diaghilev circle, Roerich, Benois, and Bakst. ♦ April 23 at 10:15 A.M. and 2: Paintings by Boldini, Ingres ("The Virgin with the Crown," from 1859), Bouguereau, and Grimshaw (the Jamesian master of the damp Victorian cityscape) are among the highlights of a sale of nineteenth-century European art. ♦ April 27 at 10:15 A.M.: Photographs. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S
April 14 at 2: To bid or not to bid? In this sale of books and manuscripts from the world of English drama, that won't even be a question, provided one has the necessary funds. The earliest obtainable copy of "Hamlet," a fine third edition printed in 1611 (roughly ten years after the play was written) and the only known copy in private hands, tops the auction with an estimate of up to two million dollars. ♦ April 22 at 10 A.M. and 2: Paintings by Bouguereau and Corot highlight an auction of nineteenth-century European art works. ♦ April 27 at 10 A.M. and 2: A woman wearing nothing but stiletto heels and a pair of oversized sunglasses aims a pistol at anyone who dares to look at her in Helmut Newton's "Panoramic Nude with Gun," one of the many striking pic-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tures in this sale of photography from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which also includes photos by Adams, Lange, Brancusi, and Moholy-Nagy. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

PHILLIPS
Photography, one of the upstart house's strengths, dominates the new schedule. April 22 at 7 and April 23 at 10 A.M.: "A Century of Fine Photographs: 1840s-1940s." ♦ April 23 at 7 and April 24 at 10 A.M.: Two more sessions of photographs. ♦ April 24 at 2: Works by the Magnum photographers. (450 W. 15th St. 212-940-1200.)

DOYLE
April 21 at 10 A.M.: An auction of vintage couture (including fashions from the collections of the Marquesa de San Damián and the designer Pauline Trigère), along with a selection of costume jewelry and accessories, is the highlight of Doyle's April sales. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-4141.)

SWANN
April 15 at 10:30 A.M.: "A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean," a handsome hand-colored portfolio of maps and engraved plates based on sketches made during the final voyage of the British explorer Captain James Cook, highlights a wide-ranging auction of rare scientific, religious, and literary texts. ♦ April 19 at 10:30 A.M.: Early printed books. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL ART & ANTIQUES SHOW
A Wendy production featuring fifty dealers from Europe and the Americas. (7th Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 67th St. 212-472-1180. April 23-28.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Elijah Moshinsky's stately production of **"Nabucco,"** featuring Susan Neves, Elizabeth Bishop, Jianyi Zhang, Leo Nucci, Samuel Ramey, and the superb Metropolitan Opera Chorus, which, when singing "Va, pensiero," becomes a character unto itself; Carlo Rizzi conducts. (April 14 at 8.) ♦ Maria Guleghina, the spectacular star of the production's 2001 début cast, replaces Neves in the punishing role of Abigaille, while Marina Domashenko and Gwyn Hughes Jones replace Bishop and Zhang. (April 17 at 8:30 and April 20 at 8.) ♦ Mark Delavan replaces Nucci in the final performance of the season. (April 23 at 8.) ♦ **"Don Giovanni,"** with Alexandra Deshorties, Solveig Kringelborn, Camilla Tilling, Matthew Polenzani, Peter Mattei, and Michele Pertusi; Andrew Davis. (April 15 and April 19 at 7:30, April 21 at 8, and April 24 at 8:15.) ♦ Julius Rudel conducts the final performance of **"Madama Butterfly,"** featuring Cynthia Lawrence and Richard Leech. (April 16 at 8.) ♦ **"Siegfried,"** the third installment of Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen," with Jane Eaglen (as Brünnhilde), Elena Zaremba, Jon Fredric West (in the title role), Gerhard Siegel, James Morris, Richard Paul Fink, and Matti Salminen; James Levine. (April 17 at noon.) ♦ Otto Schenk's naturalistic 1987 production of **"Das Rheingold,"** the four-scene abduction fantasy that opens Wagner's "Ring," is hardly a triumph of imagination, but it's a decent enough platform for the brand of richly layered interpretation that Levine and his cast present. James Morris's Wotan may have worn a bit over the years, but there's still something superheroic in his sonorous bass, and Philip Langridge's animated Loge keeps things moving with resonant sweeps of clear tenor sound. Also with Jennifer Welch-Babidge (a fresh, if skittish Freia), Yvonne Naef (a rich-voiced and forceful Fricka, in a splendid début), and Richard Paul Fink (a brawny Alberich). (April 22 and April 26 at 8.) ♦ **"Götterdämmerung,"** the convulsive final chapter of the "Ring" cycle, featuring Eaglen, Naef (as the Valkyrie Waltraute), and West, along with Matti Salminen (a threatening, magnificent Hagen), Alan Held, and Margaret Jane Wray; Levine. (April 24 at noon.) ♦ Wagner's **"Die Walküre,"** with Gabriele Schnaut, Lisa Gasteen, Yvonne Naef, Plácido Domingo, James Morris, and Salminen; Levine. (April 27 at 6.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
Rossini's **"Ermione,"** with Alexandrina Pendatchanska (in the title role), Ursula Ferri, Gregory Kunde, and Barry Banks; George Manahan conducts. (April 14, April 20, and April 22 at 7:30 and April 17 at 1:30.) ♦ "Sweeney Todd" isn't the only musical on City Opera's spring schedule—there's also Handel's **"Xerxes,"** which, in Stephen Wadsworth's light-headed English-language adaptation (with additional lyrics by Carol Palca Kelley), carries all the wisdom and subtlety of a twenty-first-century sitcom. But the work is, for the most part, beautifully sung (with Sarah Connolly, Amy Burton, Lisa Saffer, and Jake Gardner, all irrepressibly theatrical creatures, taking high honors), and Thomas Lynch's country-house set has a pleasant ambience; Gary Thor Wedow. (April 15 and April 21 at 7:30, April 18 at 1:30, and April 24 at 8.) ♦ **"Le Nozze di Figaro,"** with Georgia Jarman, Angela Fout, Jennifer Rivera, Kelly Anderson, and Marcus DeLoach; Steven Mosteller. (April 16 at 8 and April 24 at 1:30.) ♦ **"Tosca,"** with Michele Capalbo, Carlo Ventre, and Grant Youngblood; Joseph Rescigno. (April 17 and April 23 at 8 and April 25 at 1:30.) (New York State Theatre. 212-870-5570. These are the final performances of the season.)

BAM OPERA: HANDEL'S "SIROE"
Andrea Marcon and his Venice Baroque Orchestra offer the American stage première of Handel's 1728 opera, with a cast that includes Liliana Rugiero and Vito Priante. (BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. April 17, April 20, and April 23-24 at 7:30. See This Week.)

OPERA ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK
Eve Queler conducts a concert performance of Ponchielli's **"La Gioconda,"** with Aprile Millo and Marcello Giordani leading the cast. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 20 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The Philharmonic returns to duty with a concert conducted by Asher Fisch, the music director of the Israeli Opera, who conducts a sub-rosa Second Viennese School program: music by Bach (the Ricercare from the "Musical Offering," orchestrated by Webern), Brahms (the Piano Quartet in G Minor, orchestrated by Schoenberg), and Berg (the Violin Concerto, with Pinchas Zukerman). (April 15 and April 20 at 7:30 and April 16-17 at 8.) ♦ Colin Davis, making his last appearances with the orchestra this season, indulges in works by two of his favorite composers, Berlioz (the overture to "Les Francs-Juges") and Sibelius (the Seventh Symphony); the mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter will lend her cool and graceful sound to vocal selections by both composers. (April 22 at 7:30 and April 23-24 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

ORCHESTRA OF ST. LUKE'S
Wolfgang Holzmair, an Austrian lieder artist of impeccable sensitivity, is the guest for the conductor Roger Norrington's program of orchestrations of Schubert songs by Brahms, Webern, Britten, and Reger. The concert begins with the composer's "Rosamunde" Overture and concludes with the Symphony No. 9 ("The Great"). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 15 at 8.)

CHANTICLEER: "SOUND IN SPIRIT"
The bell-like voices of the world's reigning male chorus join to perform sacred music from the Middle Ages to the present at the Temple of Dendur. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3939. April 20 at 8.)

NEW WORLD SYMPHONY
Michael Tilson Thomas brings his other band—a superb training orchestra for the cream of young conservatory talent, based in Miami—to Carnegie Hall as part of his "Perspectives" series. April 22 at 7:30: The violinist Chee-Yun is among the soloists for a program of modern music by Varèse ("Déserts"), Harrison, Berio, and Tilson Thomas himself (the New York première of "Island Music"). (Zankel Hall.) ♦ April 24 at 8: Berio's "Epiphanies" is the calm center of a trenchant program of Stravinsky (the Symphony in Three Movements) and Beethoven (the Symphony No. 5). (Stern Auditorium.) (212-247-7800.)

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA OF EUROPE
No other group of its kind combines such richness of sound with such a solid grasp of detail. The orchestra offers two different New York concerts with the pianist András Schiff, who will also conduct. April 25 at 3: Bach's Keyboard Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052 and Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major, along with Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 2 and excerpts from the composer's music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream." (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500.) ♦ April 27 at 8: Bach's Keyboard Concerto in D Major, BWV 1054 and Fifth Brandenburg Concerto share the concert with Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 and the "Italian" Symphony. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

"MUSIC BEFORE 1800" SERIES: LES TALENS LYRIQUES
Christophe Rousset's early-music orchestra teams up with the soprano Gaële Le Roi for "Amour, Amor," songs of love and loss by Lully, Handel, and Alessandro Scarlatti. (Corpus Christi Church, 529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266. April 25 at 4.)

RECITALS

EMERSON STRING QUARTET
Beethoven's String Quartet in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 131, stands in serene balance with Part 1 of Bach's "Art of Fugue" in the group's latest concert, at Alice Tully Hall. (212-721-6500. April 14 at 8.)

MARINO FORMENTI
"Islands of Fire: The Revolution of the Fifties"—a relaxing saunter through unspeakably difficult works by Messiaen, Stockhausen, and Barraqué—is the first of three twentieth-century programs by the daredevil young Italian pianist. (Clark Studio Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. April 17 at 8.)

RUTH ANN SWENSON
Warren Jones accompanies the soprano in an afternoon of songs and arias by Handel, Puccini, Rachmaninoff (the "Vocalise"), and Strauss. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. April 18 at 2.)

"PERSPECTIVES": EMANUEL AX
Debussy is the theme for the pianist's three-concert series at Zankel Hall, performed in collaboration with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. April 19 at 7:30: Yefim Bronfman is the special guest for a program that features the composer's Sonata for Violin and Piano, the two-piano suite "En Blanc et Noir," and the "Première Rhapsodie" for clarinet and piano, alongside music by Schumann and Marc-André Dalbavie (a première). ♦ April 24 at 7:30: Steven Stucky's "Sonate en Forme des Préludes" receives its première in a concert also featuring music by Messiaen, Fauré (the Piano Quartet in G Minor), and Debussy (the Cello Sonata, with Yo-Yo Ma). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800.)

THE MUTTER-PREVIN-HARRELL TRIO
Three venerable musicians (on violin, piano, and cello, respectively), newly bound together, make their inaugural appearance at Carnegie Hall with a program of Beethoven, Brahms (the Trio in B Major, Op. 8), and Mendelssohn. (212-247-7800. April 19 at 8.)

GUARNERI STRING QUARTET
Performing works by Mozart, Kodály, and Sibelius (his only quartet, "Voces Intimae"). (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. April 21 at 8.)

CHRISTIAN TETZLAFF AND LARS VOGT
The violinist and the pianist, two artists who uphold the best German tradition of intelligent and scrupulous musicianship, devote their energy to sonatas by Janáček and Bartók. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. April 22 at 8.)

"INTERPRETATIONS": MORTON SUBOTNICK
The California electronic-music pioneer comes to Merkin Concert Hall with a selection of works (including "Sidewinder") controlled by solo laptop computer. (212-501-3330. April 22 at 8.)

ALFRED BRENDEL
The philosopher-king of the piano graces Gotham with two recitals. April 22 at 8: A solo concert of Mozart (including the Fantasy in C Minor), Schu-

bert, and Beethoven (the Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.) ♦ April 27 at 8: Brendel joins his son, the cellist Adrian Brendel, for an all-Beethoven program. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

MUSICIANS FROM MARLBORO
In this collaborative series, seasoned artists (including the elegant French pianist Alain Planès) team up with younger colleagues. The program includes music by Adès (his beguiling "Catch"), Mozart (the Clarinet Quintet), and Schoenberg ("Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte"). (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. April 23 at 8.)

MILLER THEATRE: MILTON BABBITT
The kindly doyen of American serialism receives a tribute from the pianist Marilyn Nonken and the members of Ensemble 21, who perform such paramount works as the rhapsodic John Hollander setting "Philomel" and the jazz-soaked "All Set." (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. April 23 at 8.)

THE COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN
Paul Jacobs, a member of the Juilliard faculty, does the honors; stay as long as you please. (Church of St. Mary the Virgin, 145 W. 46th St. April 24, beginning at 1:30 and ending at approximately 10:30. No tickets required.)

JEAN-YVES THIBAUDET AND THE ROSSETTI STRING QUARTET
A group of suavely Francophone musicians gather for music of Mozart, Debussy (the String Quartet), and Franck (the Piano Quintet). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. April 27 at 7:30.)

RICHARD GOODE
The consummate pianist offers a program of music by Beethoven, Schubert (the Sonata in A Minor, D. 845), Janáček ("From the Street"), and Chopin. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. April 27 at 8.)

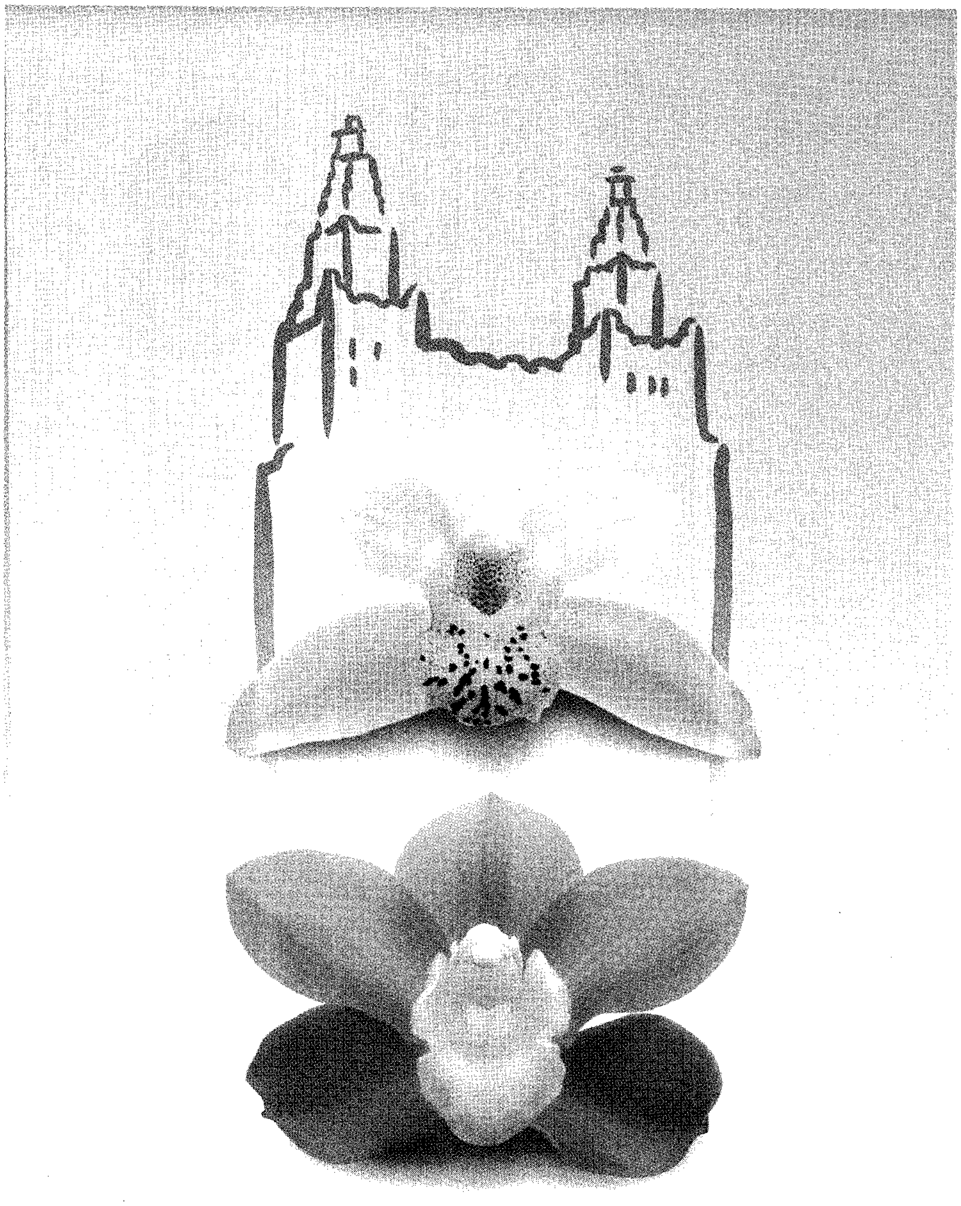
BRUCE LEVINGSTON
World premières by Bolcom and Del Tredici are the highlights of a concert by the intrepid pianist that also includes works by Schubert, Debussy, and Liszt. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. April 27 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

POETRY PROJECT SILENT AUCTION
Signed books, paintings, and donated items by John Ashbery, Paul Auster, Steve Earle, Patti Smith, Lou Reed, and others will be on display. The musician Thurston Moore will provide the entertainment, along with Edmund Berrigan, Brenda Coultas, and Edwin Torres, who will read from their poetry. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910. April 17 at 3.)

READINGS
April 15 at 7:30: Graywolf Press celebrates its thirtieth anniversary with an evening of verse. The poets Elizabeth Alexander, Sophie Cabot Black, Matthea Harvey, Tony Hoagland, Vijay Seshadri, and Mark Wunderlich will be on hand. (National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S. For more information, call 212-254-9628.) ♦ April 17 at 2: Samuel Menashe reads from his poetry. (Jefferson Market Library, Sixth Ave. at 10th St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ April 19 at 8: The poets James Fenton, Eric Ormsby, Kay Ryan, Grace Schulman, and Cynthia Zarin, the literary critic Bonnie Costello, and the author Patricia Willis pay tribute to the late American poet Marianne Moore. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

TALKS
April 15 at 7: The journalist Samantha Power, who won a Pulitzer for "A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," joins Dr. Rony Brauman, the former president of Doctors Without Borders, to discuss "In the Shadow of 'Just Wars,' " a new collection of essays. (Katie Murphy Amphitheater, Fashion Institute of Technology, Seventh Ave. at 27th St. For reservations, call 212-847-3151.) ♦ April 15 at 7:30: The philosophy professors Emily Grosholz and Nancy Bauer, along with Catharine R. Stimpson, the founding editor of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* and other academics, consider the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir. (La Maison Française, New York University, 16 Washington Mews. 212-998-8750.)



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MOVIES OPENING

THE AGRONOMIST
Jonathan Demme directed this documentary about the Haitian journalist and freedom fighter Jean Dominique, whose assassination, in 2000, remains unsolved. Opening April 23.

CLOSE YOUR EYES
A hypnotherapist (Goran Visnjic) has the unusual ability to glimpse visual memories from his patients' minds, in a psychological thriller directed by Nick Willing. With Shirley Henderson, Miranda Otto, and Paddy Considine. Opening April 23.

CONNIE AND CARLA
Michael Lembeck directed this comedy with Toni Collette and Nia Vardalos as two small-town cabaret singers who flee to Los Angeles after they witness a Mob hit. Opening April 16.

GYPSY 83
A road-trip movie in which two goths from rural Ohio travel to New York to compete in a Stevie Nicks-impersonator contest. Directed and co-written by Todd Stephens. Opening April 16.

KILL BILL VOL. 2
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening April 16.

MAN ON FIRE
Denzel Washington plays an élite security guard hired to protect a young American girl (Dakota Fanning) in Mexico City, in a thriller directed by Tony Scott. With Christopher Walken, Radha Mitchell, and Mickey Rourke. Opening April 23.

MC5: A TRUE TESTIMONIAL
David C. Thomas's documentary about the confrontational proto-punk band from Detroit. Opening April 23. (Cinema Village.)

MORLANG
An English-language drama from the Netherlands about infidelity between an artist (Paul Freeman) and his muse (Diana Kent), written and directed by Tjebbo Penning. Opening April 23.

PLAN COLOMBIA: CASHING IN ON THE DRUG WAR FAILURE
A documentary exposé of America's counter-narcotics tactics in South America that includes interviews with Noam Chomsky and the late Senator Paul Wellstone. Directed by Gerard Ungerman and Audrey Brohy. Opening April 23. (Anthology Film Archives.)

THE PUNISHER
The story of an F.B.I. agent (Thomas Jane) who avenges the murder of his family in his own extreme, vigilante style. Based on the Marvel comic book. With John Travolta. Directed by Jonathan Hensleigh. Opening April 16.

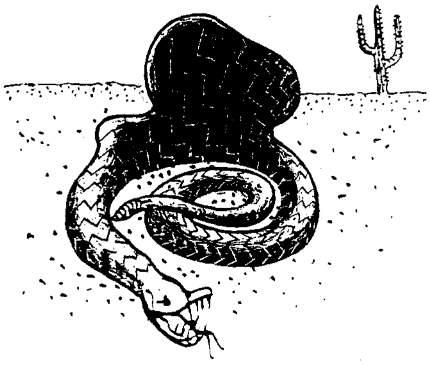
13 GOING ON 30
Jennifer Garner plays a young girl who has been magically transformed into the thirty-year-old version of herself, in a comedy directed by Gary Winick. With Mark Ruffalo as her grownup childhood friend. Opening April 23.

THIS SO-CALLED DISASTER
Michael Almereyda's behind-the-scenes documentary that follows Sam Shepard as he conducts rehearsals for his new play, "The Late Henry Moss," with a cast that includes Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, Cheech Marin, and Woody Harrelson. Opening April 21. (Film Forum.)

A THOUSAND CLOUDS OF PEACE
A coming-of-age film written and directed by Julián Hernández, in which a distraught gay teenager wanders the streets of Mexico City. In Spanish. Opening April 16. (Quad Cinema.)

THE TWILIGHT SAMURAI
Yoji Yamada directed this drama set at the end of Japan's Edo period about a semi-retired samurai (Hiroyuki Sanada) who gets involved in clan warfare. In Japanese. Opening April 23.

YOUNG ADAM
A drama set in nineteen-fifties Glasgow, in which a drifter (Ewan McGregor) finds work on a barge and soon becomes involved with the captain's wife (Tilda Swinton) and a murder investigation. With Peter Mullan as the cuckold. Directed by David MacKenzie. Opening April 16.



FILM NOTES

BON VOYAGE
An entertaining and frivolous farce mounted on a pedestal of period realism. In Bordeaux in 1940, the remnants of the French government and the Parisian haut monde mill about in the lobby of the deluxe Hotel Splendide. From the start, the movie is a frenzied fashion show of elegant black Citroëns, rakishly conservative double-breasted suits, and plush silk coverlets. The starlet Viviane (Isabelle Adjani) is the hub of the wheel, a femme fatale whose eyelashes brush the vanity of three men haplessly in love with her: the sappy hero, Frédéric (Grégori Derangère), a carefree young writer who has been Viviane's backstairs lover for years; the suave government minister Beaufort (Gérard Depardieu), who can hardly wait to collaborate with the Germans; and Winckler (Peter Coyote), an English journalist who is also a German spy. The movie reminds one of "Casablanca" and other glamorous Hollywood wartime melodramas in which political intrigue flows through love affairs and black-market deals, and everyone rushing about is connected to everyone else. The expert cast knows how to play farce—exaggerate everything, but not too much.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/29/04.) (Paris and Sunshine Cinema.)

DAWN OF THE DEAD
Some may have forgotten, and others may never have experienced, the hilarious shocks that George Romero, Sam Raimi, and their fellow horror-meisters offered audiences a decade or two ago. The audacity of films like "Evil Dead 2" and the original "Dawn of the Dead" surprised moviegoers with surreal images of graphic, unnatural violence. In this remake of Romero's zombiefest, the director Zack Snyder brings back the cringe-inducing gore of yore as his flesh-eating zombies attack a Wisconsin mall in search of fresh meat (Sarah Polley and Ving Rhames among a cast of tasty others). The story hacks away most of the original film's satirical subtext of a consumer society gone wild, but it has retained much of the suspenseful action sequences and the fabulously disgusting makeup effects. The movie may be as mindless as a swarm of the undead, but it's fun in its splatter-filled way.—*Bruce Diones* (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

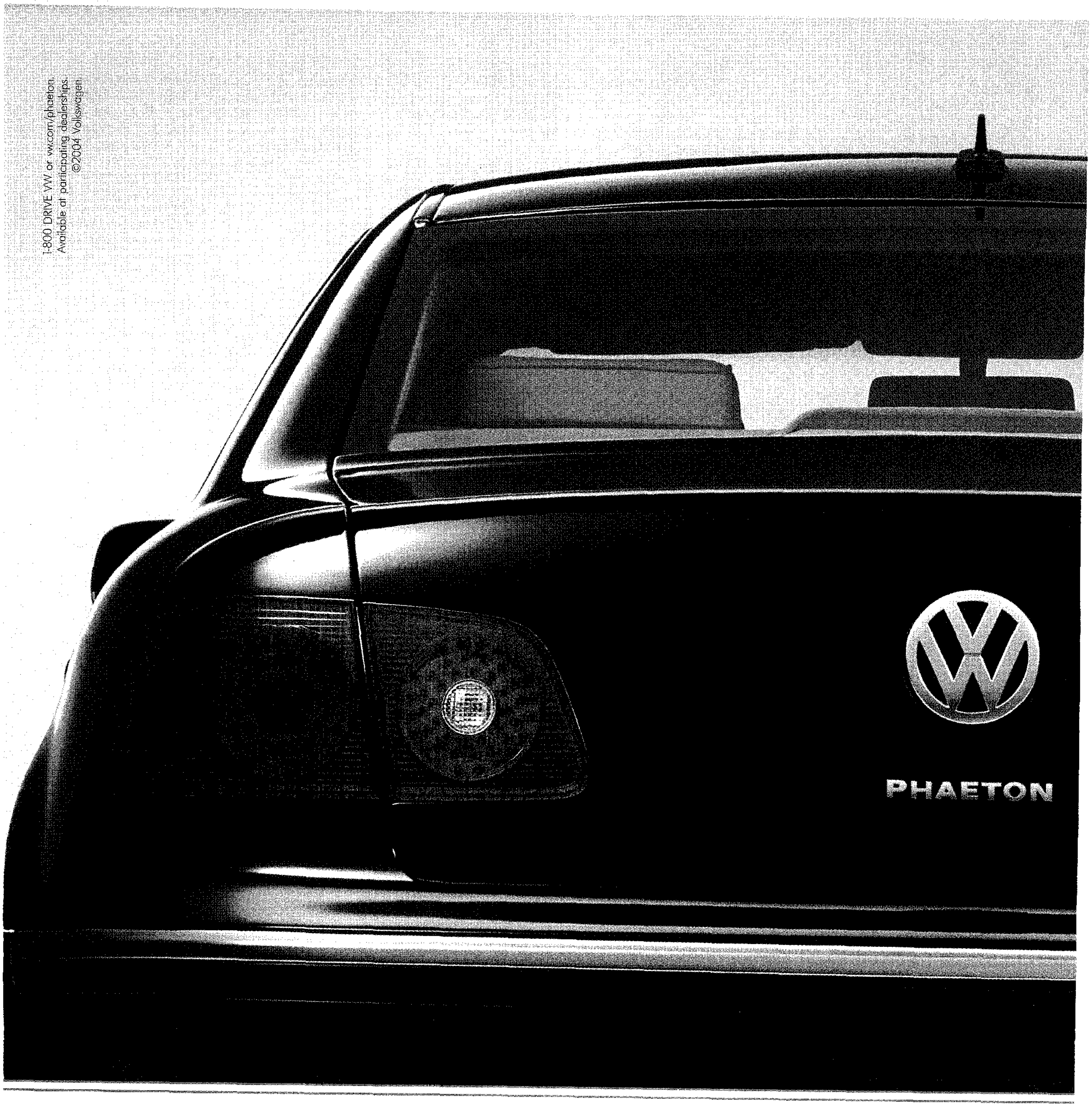
DOGVILLE
Pedantic, obtuse, and unwatchable, this three-hour exercise in inept avant-gardism, written and directed by Lars Von Trier, is set in a town without walls, streets, or air—a conceptual Depression-era nowheresville in the American Rockies in which obvious allegories of conformity and viciousness are acted out by a cast reciting an inhuman language into the dead silence. We might be present at a nightmarish school play. With Nicole Kidman as the poor waif who eventually takes her revenge, Paul Bettany as a weak-willed artist, and a variety of other excellent actors submitting to Von Trier's solemnly stupid rituals of betrayal. The pompous narrator is John Hurt, who sounds like Henry Fielding wishing he had a tankard in his hand.—*D.D.* (3/29/04) (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Beekman, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and 19th Street East 6.)

DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS
A gaudy, earthy anecdote about a beautiful Bahian housewife (Sonia Braga) who gets the best of both this life and the afterlife: tremendous sex with the ghost of her first husband (a charismatic cad) and security with her living mate, a loving if inhibited pharmacist. This 1978 release was the most profitable Brazilian film of its era, and the Americans who made it an art-house hit accepted the movie as a joyous primitive fable with the unassailable message that a woman needs both affection and passionate love. But the moviemaking is slack and the hedonism ugly. Right at the start, the smirking spectre-satyr hero says, "God could have made all men equal—with no balls," and the rest of the movie supports his view: that the worth of a man equals the size of his equipment. In the most repugnant scene, this macho paragon mocks the pharmacist's attempts at lovemaking; looking into his widow's eyes, the ghost howls with derision as she lies frustrated under her struggling second husband. In Portuguese.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; April 23-27.)

DRIP-ALONG DAFFY
Possibly the funniest and certainly the most succinct Western parody ever made, this 1951 Chuck Jones cartoon (written by Michael Maltese) stars Daffy Duck in the title role as (according to the subtitles) a "Western-Type Hero" who rides into the town of Snake Bite Center aiming to be its first successful sheriff and Porky Pig as the "Comedy Relief," who acts as Daffy's sidekick and ultimately steals the show. The visual humor consists of one outrageous sight gag after another. Snake Bite Center makes Deadwood look like deadwood—Jones's West is so wild, a horse pulls a gun on a blacksmith. His crisp, confident filmmaking keeps the action moving with a fine satiric edge. So does the writer Maltese's deft cavalcade of verbal clichés: he describes the villain, Nasty Canasta, on his "Wanted" poster as "Rustler, Bandit and Square Dance Caller."—*M.S.* (Film Forum; April 16-22.)

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND
Yes, it's another attempt by the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman to replace the antique notion of cinema as persuasive entertainment with that of cinema as some strange, whirring device for the disorientation of the human brain. Jim Carrey plays Joel and Kate Winslet plays Clementine, who fall in love and out of love and back in love again. Fair enough, but Kaufman and the director, Michel Gondry, run the whole story in rewind, as if to prove the Shakespearean theorem that journeys end in lovers' meeting. Just to complicate the issue, Tom Wilkinson plays a dodgy doctor who can, for a fee, wipe the memory of a chosen individual, adored or otherwise, from your mind—a treatment of which both Joel and Clementine avail themselves. The conceit writhes with implausibility, yet it also gives off flashes of high-tech, low-down beauty, as scenes of tenderness begin to go grievously blank before the sweethearts' eyes. Carrey's latest effort to elude, or at least refine, his loony persona is more sincere than convincing, and it is left to Winslet, at once fierce and footloose, to carry the show. On the eighth viewing, say, the damn thing might even make sense. With Mark Ruffalo, Elijah Wood, and a blissed-out Kirsten Dunst—what is she on?—*Anthony Lane* (3/22/04) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 72nd Street East, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

THE GOLD RUSH
He enters, "pursued by a bear"—the man who for generations of filmgoers has been the embodiment of "the little fellow": humanity. In this extraordinarily sweet and graceful 1925 comedy, Chaplin is the weak and helpless perfect gentleman in the Klondike world of bears and brutes; yet his gallantry wins him the gold and the girl, too. In 1958 an international jury at Brussels selected this work as the second greatest film of all time (after "Potemkin"). Silent; Chaplin later added music and a narration.—*Pauline Kael* (Anthology Film Archives; April 18.)



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HELLBOY
Ron Perlman is a man born for prosthetics. With his large features and solid but nimble body, he convincingly portrays otherworldly creatures. Here, in the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro's cuckoo comic-book feature, he's a super-sized red demon from hell. The complicated and ultimately senseless plot begins with Hellboy's origins (he was "born" during a Second World War Nazi occult ceremony presided over by Rasputin), then quickly focusses on the modern-day Hellboy and his adventures in fighting some doomsday monsters and the freaks that control them. It's not particularly groundbreaking stuff. Where the film really succeeds is in its dank, almost introspective atmosphere—a del Toro specialty—and in the immensely appealing bravado Perlman brings to his role. When the movie's story line concentrates on the character of Hellboy and his relationships with those important to him (the man who raised him, the girl he loves), the film becomes a unique romp, with an exciting yet vulnerable superhero at the center who just happens to be the spawn of Satan.—*B.D.* (Astor Plaza, Battery Park 11, Chelsea West, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

I'M NOT SCARED
A stirring and beautifully made poetic thriller about the natural gallantry of a young boy. Michele (Guiseppe Cristiano), a frisky ten-year-old, is spending a carefree summer in the golden wheat fields of southern Italy when he finds something unaccountable—a tiny, pale creature kept captive in a pit near an abandoned farmhouse. He makes a bond with this ghost, who turns out to be a boy his own age, feeding him and taking him out for air. At the same time, Michele tries to penetrate the mysterious goings on at his house, where the adults, including the violent roughnecks his father brings home, quarrel viciously. Like René Clément's classic "Forbidden Games" (1952), the movie reveals the sordid behavior of adults as seen through the eyes of half-comprehending but pure-hearted children. The style is at times startlingly freewheeling, as if the events emerged from a child's dream, a storybook world of monsters and rescuers. Adapted by Niccolò Ammaniti and Francesca Marciano from Ammaniti's novel. Directed by Gabriele Salvatores; cinematography by Italo Petriccione. In Italian.—*D.D.* (4/12/04) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

INTERMISSION
A sharp and scruffy movie, shot on the cheap in Dublin. The cheapness spreads into the world of the plot, as if the characters were fighting to persuade themselves that anything—their loves, their jobs, their reputations—is worth more than the price of a drink. Colin Farrell, buzzing with the chance to speak in his native accent again, plays a mean piece of work named Lehiff, whose plan is to take a girl hostage and thereby put the squeeze on her new man, the manager of a bank. Needless to say, everything goes gangrenously wrong, and we soon realize that the screenwriter, Mark O'Rowe, and the director, John Crowley, are openly courting the dark and farcical pleasures of coincidence. The dialogue is a good clean blast of filth, and the cast has the joshing coherence of a sports team, with Cillian Murphy as a store worker, Kelly Macdonald as his ex, Colm Meaney as a jaded cop with a sweet tooth for Celtic mysticism, and, most touching of all, Deirdre O'Kane as a discarded wife making up for lost, libidinous time.—*A.L.* (4/5/04) (First & 62nd Cinemas and Village Theatre VII.)

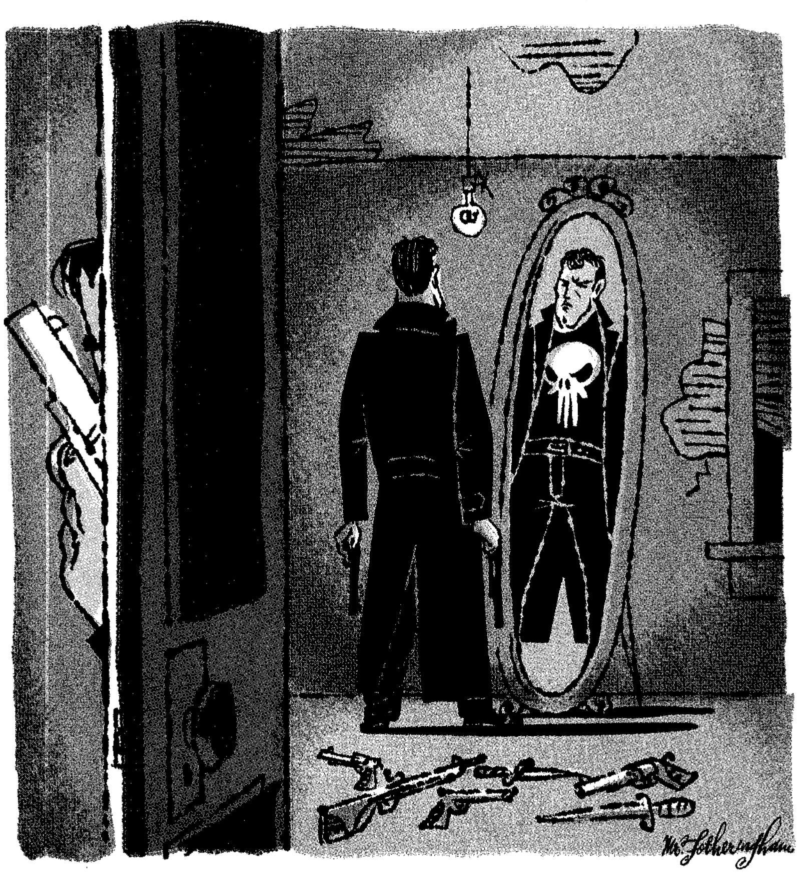
THE LADYKILLERS
An elderly lady (Irma P. Hall) lives with her memories, her cat, and her scandalized view of youth. Into her life comes a courteous (and presumably bogus) professor (Tom Hanks), who needs a room to rent and a cellar in which to make sweet music. That, at any rate, is his excuse, his true intent being to tunnel through from below to the vault of a nearby casino. The plot will be familiar to anybody versed in Ealing comedy (the original movie, directed by Alexander Mackendrick, and graced with the same title, came out in 1955), but the existence of this new version is harder to explain. It was made by the Coen brothers, whose own taste for slight provincial surrealism veers close to that of Mackendrick, but, far from refining his work, they have devised one of their coarsest pictures to date. Its grasp of time and place is, by their standard, weirdly unstable, and the supporting players, among them Marlon Wayans, J. K. Simmons, and Ryan Hurst, cannot hope to match the fooling of Peter Sellers, Cecil Parker, and Herbert Lom in the earlier film. Hanks gives his all, but the movie deflates around him; there is even what one hesitates to call a running gag, based on irritable bowels. Is that what the creators of "Fargo" now consider funny?—*A.L.* (4/5/04) (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Twin, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.)

THE RIVER
Jean Renoir's first color film, made in India, in English, was adapted from Rumer Godden's novel about a British family in India and shot along the banks of the Ganges by Renoir's great cinematographer nephew, Claude Renoir. It's a poetic study of the contact of two civilizations. Renoir does not usurp the position of an insider; he sees India with Western eyes—eyes so sensitive and highly trained that his vision of India is a mythic poem set in the midst of the Indian river of life. This river encompasses death (the Goddess Kali episode, the holy cobra that kills the child) in a way that American audiences tend to find disturbing. Rumer Godden's themes and story line are part of the texture, interwoven with the ritual feasts, the festivals, the rhythms of native music, and some people, accustomed to films edited for dramatic crescendo, dislike the serene flow—so much is going on that they feel nothing happens. There are static patches of dialogue, and some of the casting is questionable, but the theme (outsiders in a culture) meshes perfectly with the director's own position as a moviemaker in India, and visually the film is serenely yet passionately beautiful. Originally released in 1951.—*P.K.* (Anthology Film Archives; April 23-24.)

SCOOBY-DOO 2: MONSTERS UNLEASHED
More good actors trapped in dogville. Sarah Michelle Gellar and Matthew Lillard, among others, reprise their Scooby-gang roles in this sequel adaptation of the ever-running cartoon hit. As the members of Mystery Inc., they investigate the ransacking of a museum devoted to their past successes. The amateur sleuths of Coolsville and their computer-generated dog have to fight the ghouls, many from the original series, that have come back to haunt them. It's the film's one clever idea. The Pop Rocks look of the movie, bright rainbow-seventies color, is headache-inducing, and the script is just a sugar-fuelled jumble of special effects. Lots of clues, lots of running, and not a lot of fun.—*B.D.* (Battery Park 11, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.)

SHAOLIN SOCCER
A Hong Kong sports story about two feuding soccer coaches and their F/X-driven teams. The film, centering on the unique talents of a group of kung-fu students from Shaolin temple and their big game against the players from "The Evil Team," is a playfully absurd piece of hokum. The director-star, Stephen Chow, introduces his characters through visually witty setups, such as having them break into dance routines or perform high-flying stunts. As the big game approaches, the soccer action is like live anime—balls fly through the air and land on the field like meteors, and players spin in the air like tornadoes. The movie has been edited with a cleaver and not all the gags work, but its primitive moviemaking hucksterism is hard to resist. In Cantonese.—*B.D.* (Empire 25 and Sunshine Cinema.)

SPRING, SUMMER, FALL, WINTER . . . AND SPRING
A Buddhist monk (Oh Young-soo) and his disciple, a young boy, live in an enchanted setting—a temple set at the center of a very still lake high in the mountains of Korea. The boy grows up, makes mistakes, and receives punishments from his master, but all is calm and orderly until a young woman enters the scene—a disruption that leads to violence and, eventually, to renewal. Kim Ki-duk's movie has a formal grace that is nearly intoxicating: the cinematography revels in the exquisite quiet of the lake, with its natural abundance rendered in a palette of infinitely subtle grays and pale blues. The formal perfection makes one willing to overlook an implicitly priggish rejection of sexuality and the normal glories and temptations of the world outside. And the movie's piety is redeemed by a vagrant and rather subversive sense of humor that keeps the rituals of Buddhist discipline fresh and


Thomas Jane in "The Punisher," an adaptation of the Marvel comic book.

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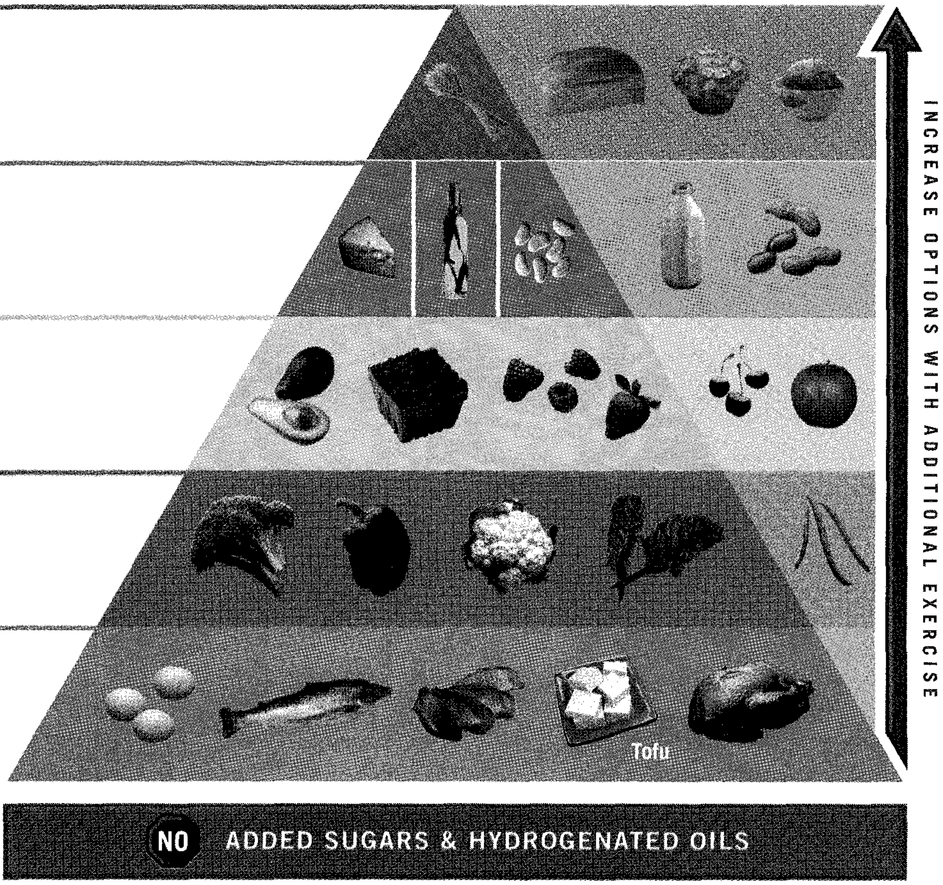
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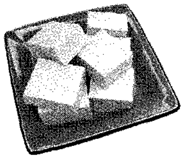
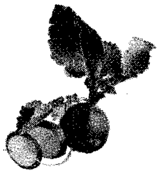
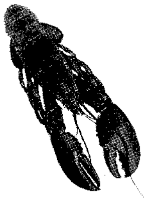
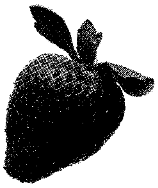
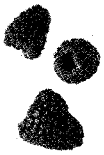
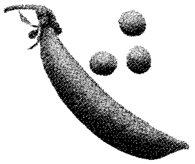






Pre-Maintenance

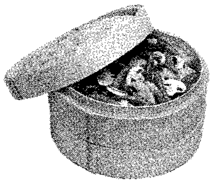
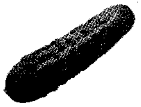
- When you are within 5 to 10 pounds of your goal weight, move to Pre-Maintenance.
- Each week, add 5 to 10 more daily grams of Net Carbs as long as you very slowly lose weight.
- Gradually introduce small portions of fruits, whole grains, and starchy vegetables like winter squash.
- Continue to take the same three supplements; take Accel™ as needed.
- When you've maintained your goal weight for a month, you've found your ACE* and reached the Lifetime Maintenance Phase.

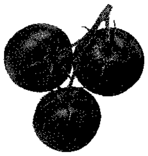
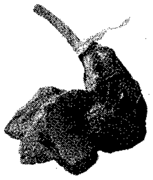




Lifetime Maintenance

- To maintain your goal weight, continue this way of eating and stay at your ACE.
- Continue to take Atkins Basic 3™, Essential Oils™, and Dieters' Advantage™.
- Your ACE may be between 40 and 120 or more grams of Net Carbs daily, depending upon your metabolism, activity level, and other factors.

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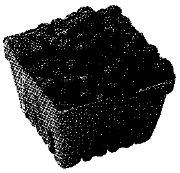

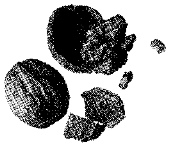

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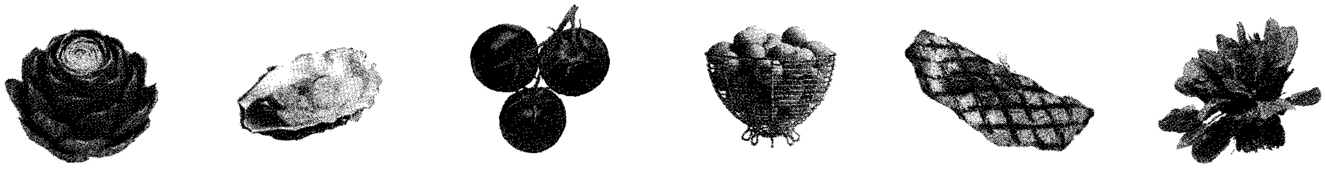

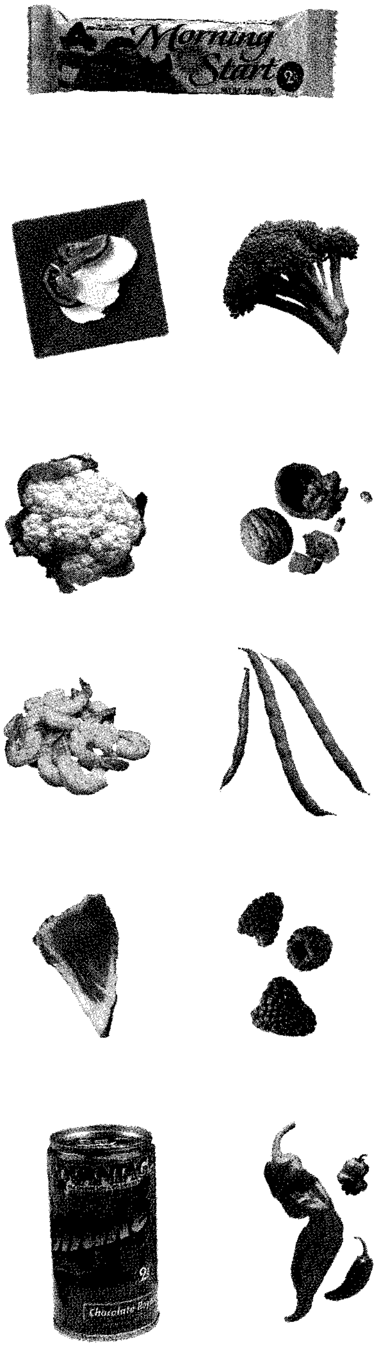

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- Eat until you're satisfied but not stuffed. Take Atkins Basic 3™, Essential Oils™, and Dieters' Advantage™ to enhance weight control and health.
- Continue your fitness regimen (or begin a moderate exercise program) throughout all four phases.†
- Do Induction for a minimum of two weeks.

Ongoing Weight Loss

- Slow your weight loss by gradually increasing your Net Carb intake.
- Increase non-starchy vegetables and add nuts, berries, or Atkins low-carb foods.
- The first week, increase to 25 daily grams of Net Carbs. Increase to 30 grams daily the next week, and so forth as long as weight loss continues.
- Continue to take the same three supplements as in Induction. If your weight plateaus, add Atkins Accel™.

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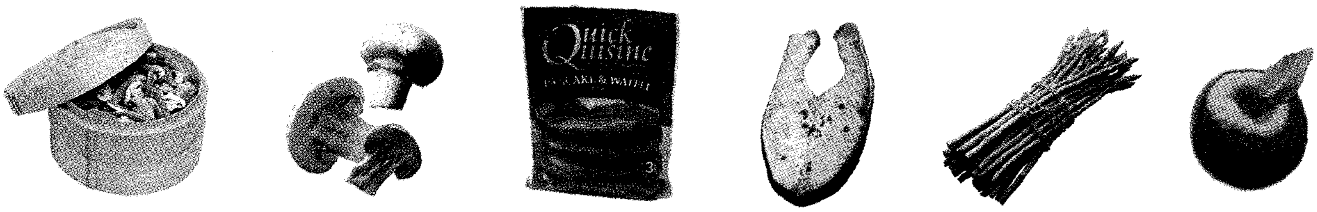
Your Atkins Carbohydrate Equilibrium is the number of grams of Net Carbs you can eat each d

†If you are extremely overweight or have not been physically active, be sure to check with your doctor before embarking on an exerci



humanly appealing. In Korean.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

TWENTYNINE PALMS

A guy and a girl, sex and violence, a sinister landscape—that's all there is in the latest provocation from the infuriating yet talented French director Bruno Dumont. David (David Wissak), who is some sort of location scout, and Katia (Katia Golubeva), a French-speaking Russian girl with no apparent occupation or interests, drive in a red Hummer through the sinister high desert of California. What are they doing there? They are in love but have nothing to say to each other. They are trying to make sex do the work of everything else, and, for a while, of course, it can; their lovemaking, photographed straight on, without lyricism or sensuality, is a successful assertion of will against a dead sky. Dumont arranges the two figures in the hostile landscape so they seem overmastered by it, then he holds the shots longer than expected, until menace builds up in the surrounding silence and our nerves are close to snapping. In Dumont's apocalyptic terms, the man and woman work their way to the end of both the magnificence and the poverty of instinct, where sex has nowhere to go but into death. Bleak, surly, but impressive. In French.—*D.D.* (4/12/04) (Cinema Village.)

WHAT ABOUT BOB?

As the character before the question mark—a multiphobic personality looking for a family—Bill Murray is touched not just with an armada of fears and tics but also with comic genius. Bob is a psychiatrist's nightmare, a needy yet cunning patient, and Dr. Leo Marvin (Richard Dreyfuss) is the shrink he's currently haunting, a self-centered psychobabbler concerned mostly with promoting his new book, "Baby Steps." Dreyfuss gives a shrewd, felicitous performance; he knows how to express a control freak's stroked ego with the merest quarter-smile. When Bob starts bonding with Leo's wife (Julie Hagerty) and kids, Murray's instinctive iconoclasm is all that keeps the film from going completely sentimental and flabby. The way Murray plays Bob, he embodies the ages of man—negatively. He can be alarmingly infantile and pathetically decrepit, and still be adept at getting what he wants. Underneath the gloss of good feeling, Murray conveys the selfishness within his basket case. Murray and Dreyfuss (and the final plot twist) manage to put across the essence of Bob and Leo's relationship: a clash of egomaniacs.—*M.S.* (BAM Rose Cinemas; April 19.)

ALSO PLAYING

THE ALAMO

Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 34th Street Theatre, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST (3/1/04)

Battery Park 11, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.

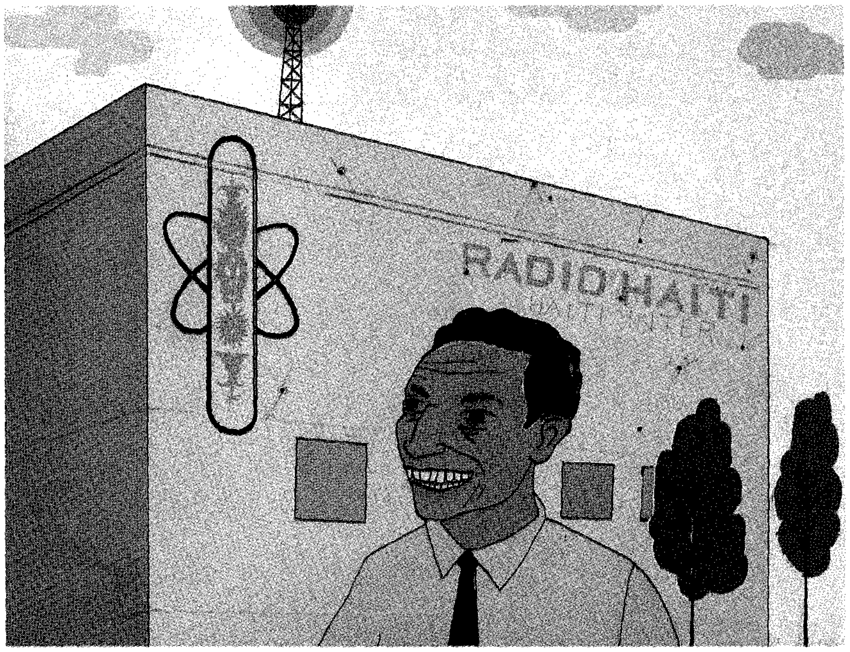
TOUCHING THE VOID (1/19/04)

Sunshine Cinema and Sutton 1 and 2.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 212-777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
Battery Park 11, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema Classics, 332 E. 11th St. (212-677-6309).
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (212-924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (212-398-3939).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (212-757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Twin, Broadway at 99th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 66th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (212-688-3800).



"The Agronomist," a documentary about the Haitian journalist Jean Dominique.

CHRISTOPHER NEAL

Pioneer Theatre, 155 E. 3rd St. (212-254-3300).
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 139-143 E. Houston St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—World-cinema Fridays. April 16 at 7:30: "Red Trousers: The Life of Hong Kong Stuntmen" (2003, Robin Shou). ♦ April 23 at 7:30: "Maqbool" (2003, Vishal Bharadwaj; in Hindi). ♦ Through April 25: A Cecil B. De Mille retrospective. The silent films will have live piano accompaniment by Donald Sosin. April 17 at 1:30: "The King of Kings" (1927; silent). ♦ April 17 at 5: "The Whispering Chorus" (1918; silent). ♦ April 18 at 1:30: "Male and Female" (1919; silent). ♦ April 18 at 4: "The Sign of the Cross" (1932). ♦ April 24 at 1:30: "Reap the Wild Wind" (1942). ♦ April 24 at 4: "Unconquered" (1947). ♦ April 25 at 2: "The Ten Commandments" (1956). ♦ Repertory nights. April 17-18: "Cul-de-Sac" (1966, Roman Polanski).

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5110)—Essential cinema. April 17 at 5:30: "Los Olvidados" (1950, Luis Buñuel; in Spanish, no subtitles). ♦ April 18 at 5: "The Blood of a Poet" (1930, Jean Cocteau; in French). ♦ April 18 at 6: "The Gold Rush" (†). ♦ April 18 at 8: "Beauty and the Beast" (1946, Cocteau; in French, no subtitles). ♦ April 24 at 5: "Zvenigora" (1928, Alexandr Dovzhenko; silent). ♦ April 25 at 3: "Arsenal" (1928-29, Dovzhenko; silent). ♦ Films presented by the Walking Picture Palace. April 21-22 at 7: Short films by Bruce Conner, Morgan Fisher, Thom Andersen, and Malcolm Brodwick. ♦ April 21-22 at 9:15: "Messiah of Evil" (1974, Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz). ♦ April 23 at 7, April 24 at 9:15, and April 25 at 5: "The People vs. Paul Crump" (1962, William Friedkin). ♦ April 23 at 9:15 and April 24 at 7: "The River" (†). ♦ April 24 at 10:15: "The Wrong Man" (1956, Alfred Hitchcock). ♦ April 25 at 8: "The Rise to Power of Louis XIV" (1966, Roberto Rossellini; in French). ♦ The *Onion* film series. April 22 at 8: "Bottle Rocket" (1994, Wes Anderson). ♦ Films from Hong Kong. April 25 at 3:30: "Royal Warriors" (1986, David Chung; in Cantonese).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—April 14 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "The Black Room" (1936, Roy William Neill). ♦ *Trace*-magazine screening. April 15 at 7: "Reconstruction" (2003, Cristoffer Boe). ♦ Bill Murray films. April 16 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Caddyshack" (1980, Harold Ramis). ♦ April 17 at 2 and 6:50: "Quick Change" (1980, Murray and Howard Franklin). ♦ April 17 at 4:30 and 9:10: "Ghostbusters" (1984, Ivan Reitman). ♦ April 18 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Stripes" (1981, Reitman). ♦ April 19 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "What About Bob?" (†). ♦ April 20 at 7:20 and 9:30: "Mad Dog and Glory" (1993, John McNaughton). ♦ April 22 at 7: "Coffee and Cigarettes" (2004, Jim Jarmusch). ♦ April 26 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Groundhog Day" (1993, Ramis). ♦ April 27 at 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Ed Wood" (1994, Tim Burton). ♦ "Cinema Tropical." April 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "I'm Looking for You" (2002, Ricardo Coral Dorado; in Spanish). ♦ African films. April 23 at 6:50 and 9:10: "Alex's Wedding" (2003, Jean Marie Teno). ♦ April 24 at 2 and 6:50: "Wariko, the Jackpot" (1994, Fadika Kramo-Lanciné; in French and Bambara). ♦ April 24 at 4:30 and 9:10: "Me and My White Pal" (2003, Pierre Yameogo; in French and Mooré). ♦ April 25 at 2 and 6:50: "Si Gueriki: The Queen Mother" (2002, Idrissou Mora Kpai; in French and Bariba). ♦ April 25 at 4:30 and 9:10: "The River" (2003, Mama Keita; in French).

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FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through April 15: An Orson Welles retrospective. April 14-15 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "The Third Man" (1949, Carol Reed). ♦ April 16-22 at 1, 3:10, 5:25, 7:45, and 10: "Annie Get Your Gun" (1950, George Sidney) and "Drip-Along Daffy" (†). ♦ April 23-27 at 1:20, 3:25, 5:30, 7:35, and 9:40: "Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands" (†).

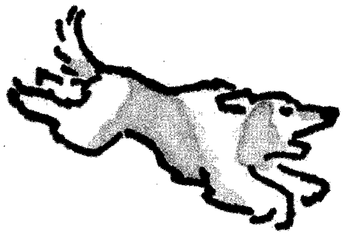
FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through May 11: "The Undeclared War: The Algerian War on Film." April 20 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Muriel" (1963, Alain Resnais; in French). ♦ April 27 at 12:30 and 6:30: "The Undeclared War" (1992, Bertrand Tavernier; in French).

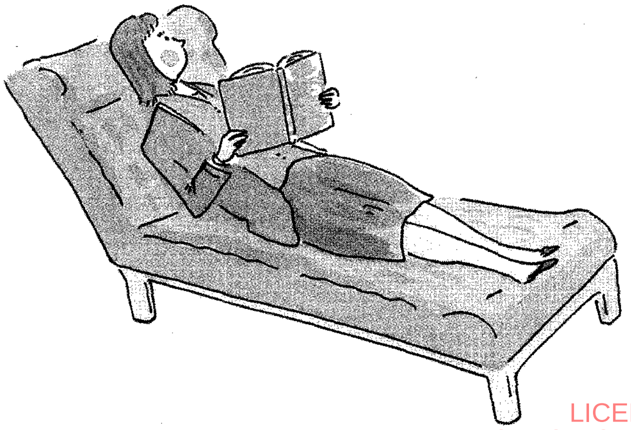
SUNSHINE CINEMA
139-143 E. Houston St. (212-358-0573)—Midnight movies. April 16-17: "The Apple" (1980, Menahem Golan). ♦ April 23-24: "Robocop" (1987, Paul Verhoeven).

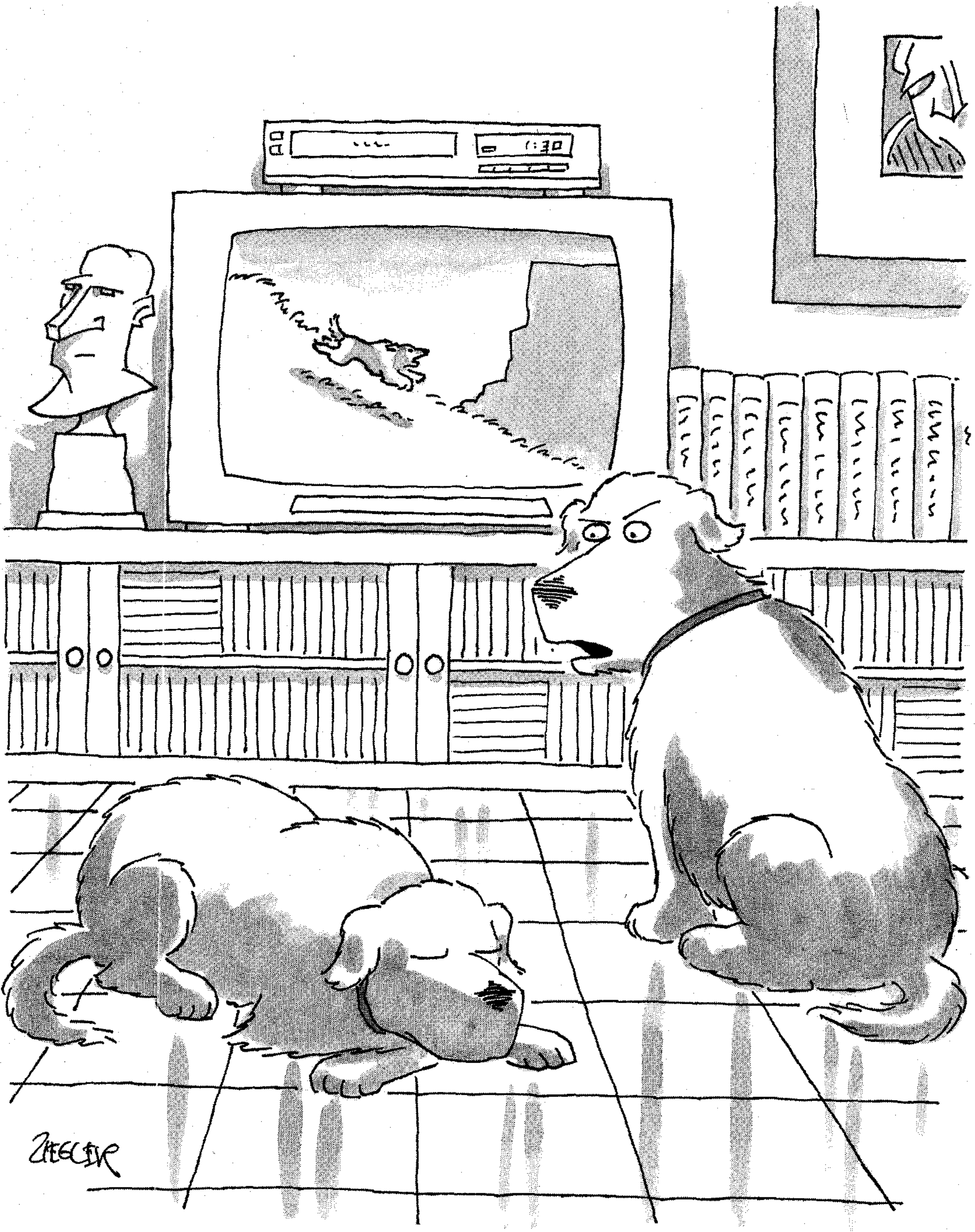
THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Music films and documentaries. April 17 at 1: "Pakeezah" (1971, Kamal Amrohi; in Hindi). ♦ April 17 at 4: " 'Are' Are" (1979, Hugo Zemp) and "Shaping Bamboo" (1979, Zemp). ♦ April 17 at 6:45: "The Color of Pomegranates" (1968, Sergei Paradjanov; in Russian). ♦ April 17 at 8:30: "The Romany Trail: Gypsy Music Into Africa" (1981, Jeremy Marre). ♦ April 17 at 9:45: "Afrita Hanoum: The Genie Girl" (1950, Henri Barakat). ♦ April 24 at 1: "Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt" (1996, Michal Goldman). ♦ April 24 at 2:15: "Fatma" (1947, Ahmed Badrakhan). ♦ April 24 at 4:45: "Billy in the Lowgrounds" (1966, Alan Lomax) and "Jazz Parades: Feet Don't Fail Me Now" (1983, Lomax). ♦ April 24 at 7:30: "Brass Unbound" (1993, Johan Van Der Keuken; in Dutch). ♦ April 24 at 9:30: "A Thousand and One Voices: The Music of Islam" (2001, Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud; in French and Arabic). ♦ Special presentation. April 18 and April 25 at 2, 4:15, 6:30, and 8:45: "To Be and to Have" (2002, Nicolas Philibert; in French).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Starting April 16: "Forever Changes: Polish Cinema Since 1989." All films are in Polish. April 16 at 2 and 6:15 and April 19 at 5:30: "Touch Me" (2003, Anna Jadowska). ♦ April 16 at 4 and April 18 at 9: "The Revenge" (2002, Andrzej Wajda). ♦ April 16 at 8:30 and April 19 at 1: "Squint Your Eyes" (2003, Andrzej Jakimowski). ♦ April 17 at 6: "Pornography" (2003, Jan Jakub Kolski). ♦ April 17 at 8:45 and April 19 at 2:45: "Success" (2002, Marek Bukowski). ♦ April 18 at 6:45, April 21 at 5, and April 24 at 4: "The Junction" (1999, Urszula Urbaniak). ♦ April 19 at 7:10, April 20 at 4, and April 22 at 9: "Happy Man" (2001, Malgorzata Szumowska). ♦ April 19 at 9 and April 20 at 2: "Amok" (1998, Natalia Koryncka-Gruz). ♦ April 21 at 1 and 6:45: "The Burial of the Potato" (1990, Kolski). ♦ April 21 at 3 and 8:45: "Johnnie Aquarius" (1993, Kolski). ♦ April 22 at 1 and April 23 at 8:15: "My Town" (2002, Marek Lechki) and "Bellissima" (2001, Artur Urbanski). ♦ April 22 at 3:30, April 23 at 6, and April 25 at 4:30: "Nothing" (1998, Dorota Kedzierzawska). ♦ April 24 at 6:15 and April 27 at 2 and 6:15: "The Spinning Wheel of Time" (1995, Andrzej Kondratiuk). ♦ April 24 at 8:30 and April 26 at 2: "The Temptation" (1995, Barbara Sass). ♦ April 25 at 6:45 and April 26 at 4: "Hi, Tereska" (2001, Robert Glinski). ♦ April 25 at 8:45 and April 27 at 4:15 and 8:30: "Louder Than Bombs" (2000, Przemylaw Wojcieszek). ♦ Through April 25: "Keeping Time: Conductors on Film." Many of the programs will be introduced by George Jellinek, of WQXR radio. April 17 at 2: Leonard Bernstein and Sergiu Celibidache in rehearsal. ♦ April 18 at 2: "Taking Sides" (2001, István Szabó). ♦ April 18 at 4:30: Bruno Walter and Wilhelm Furtlänger conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. ♦ April 20 at 6:30: A century of conducting at the Berlin Philharmonic. ♦ April 20 at 9: Herbert von Karajan conducting Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. ♦ April 24 at 2: Sergui Celibidache conducting Bruckner. ♦ April 25 at 2: "Leonard Bernstein: The Love of Three Orchestras" (1986, Humphrey Burton).

THE FUNNY PAGES







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LAUGHTER}
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Annie Hall (1977)
APRIL 17

Dr. Strangelove (1964)
APRIL 24

Singin' in the Rain (1952)
MAY 1

Random Harvest (1942)
MAY 8

The Day of the Jackal (1973)
MAY 15

Tootsie (1982)
MAY 22

The Red Badge of Courage (1951)
MAY 29

Papillon (1973)
JUNE 5

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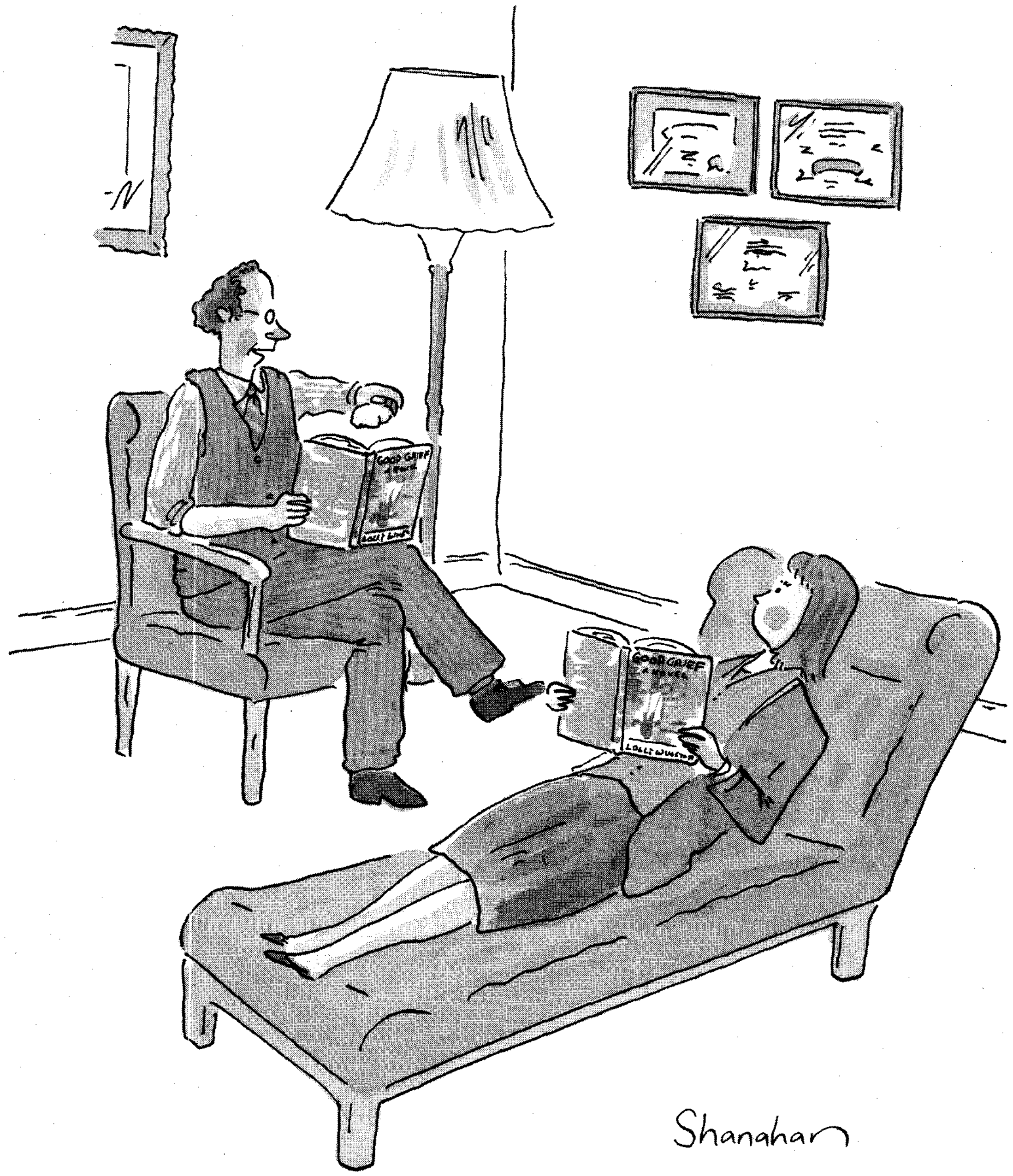
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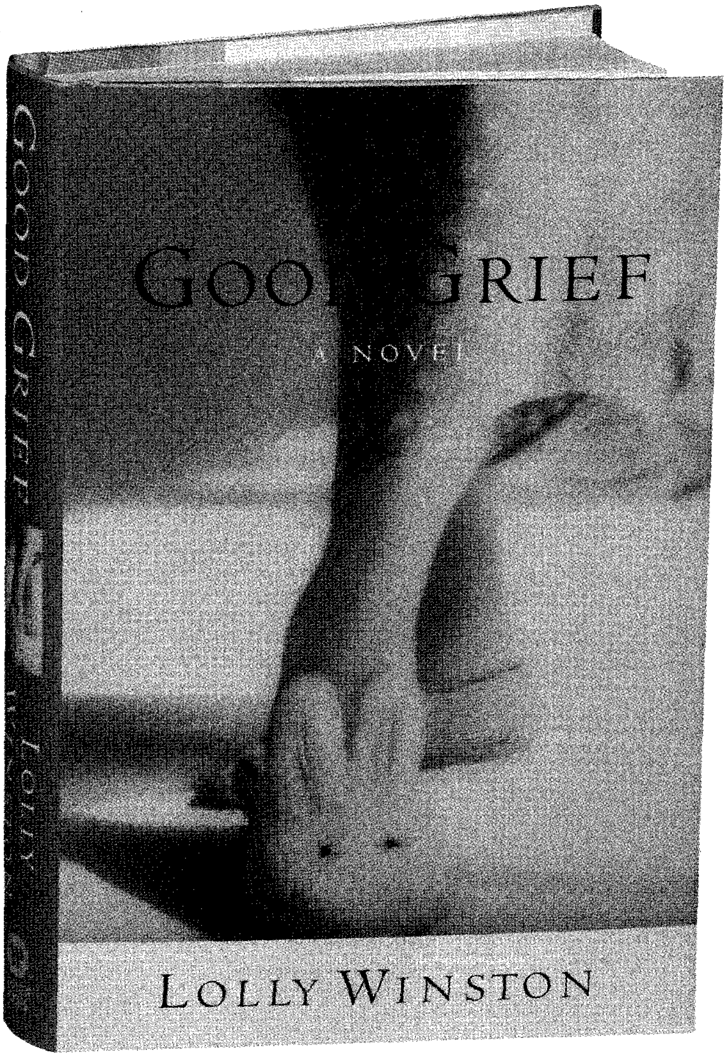

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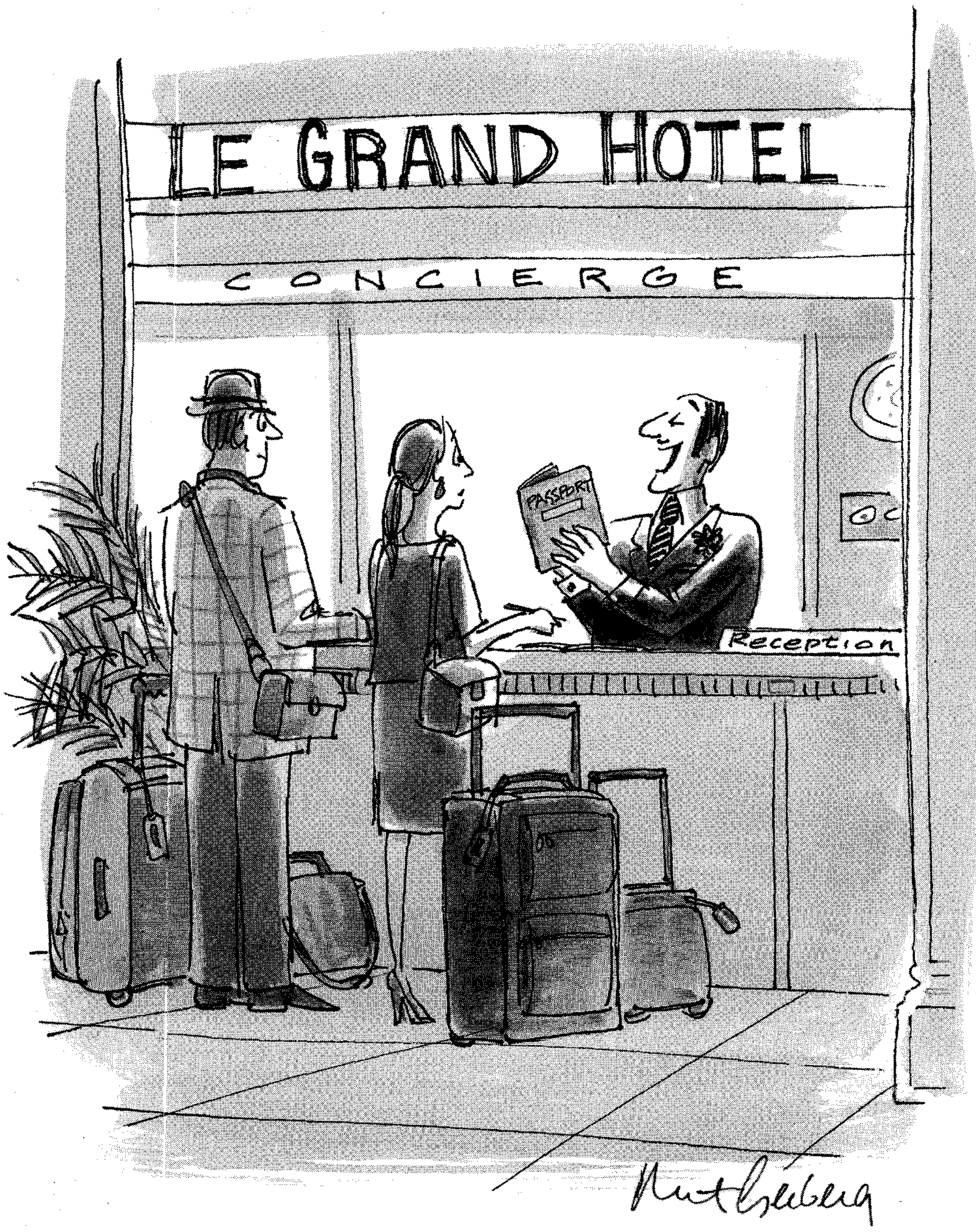
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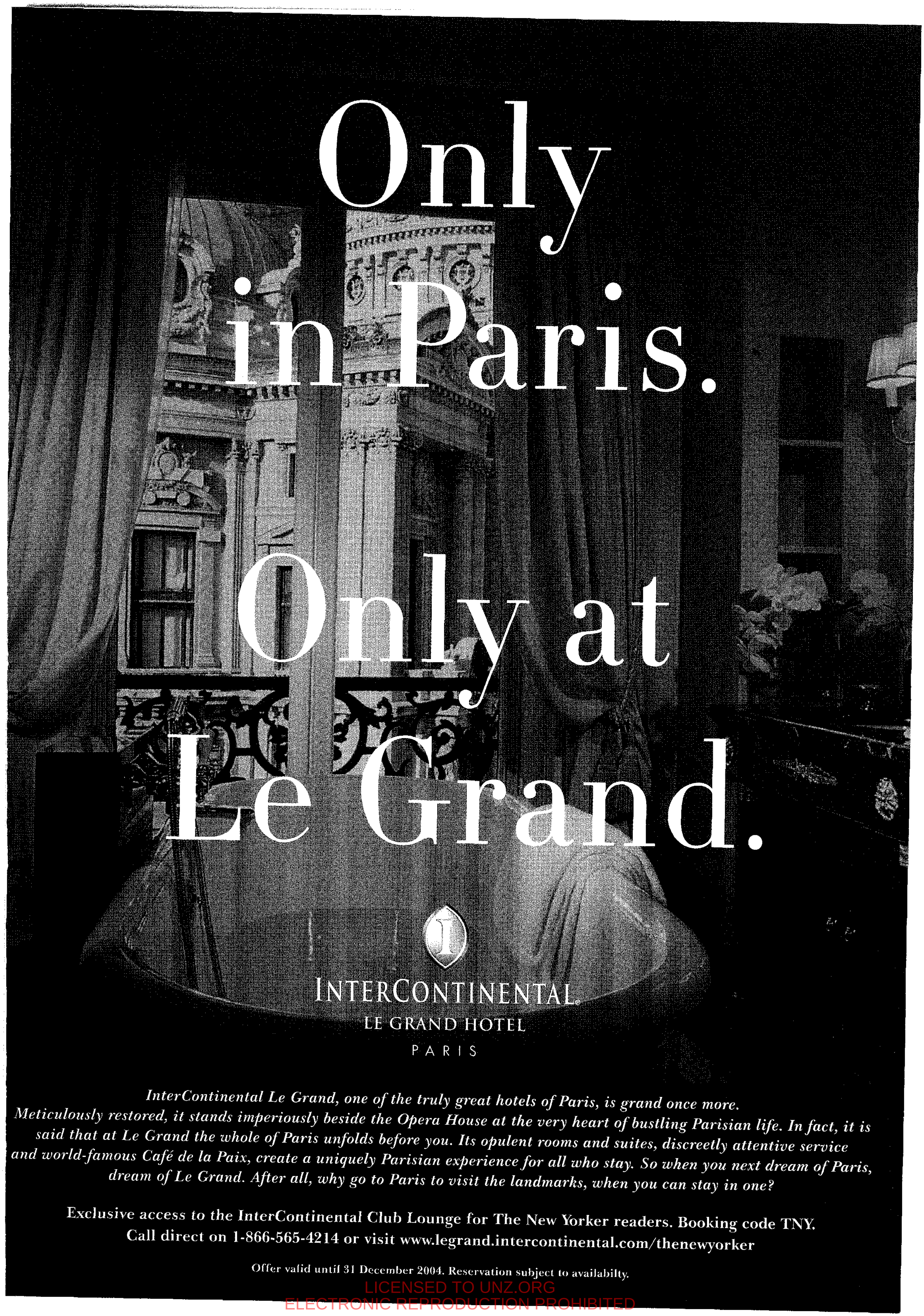

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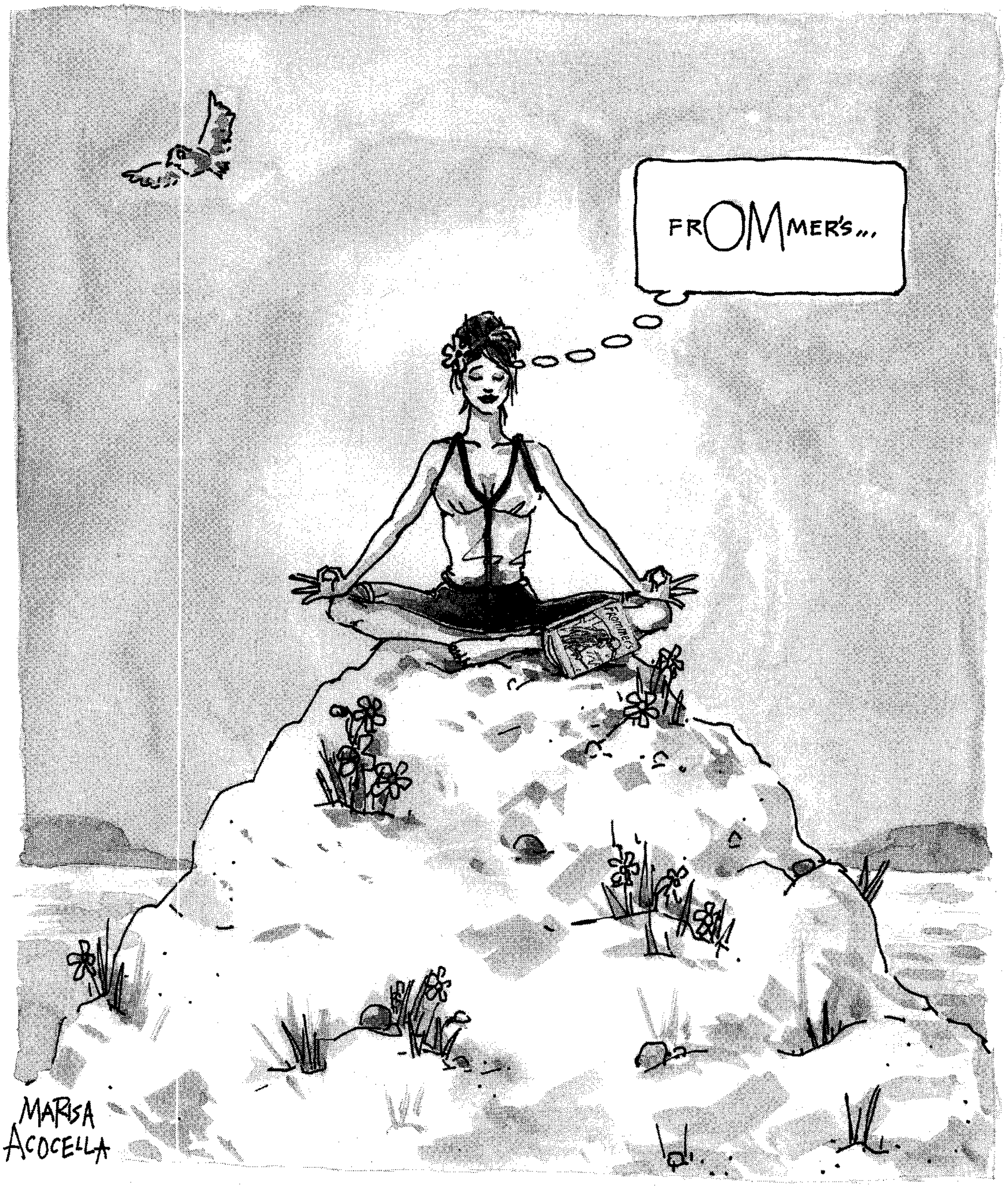
FROMMER'S...
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MARISA ACOCELLA

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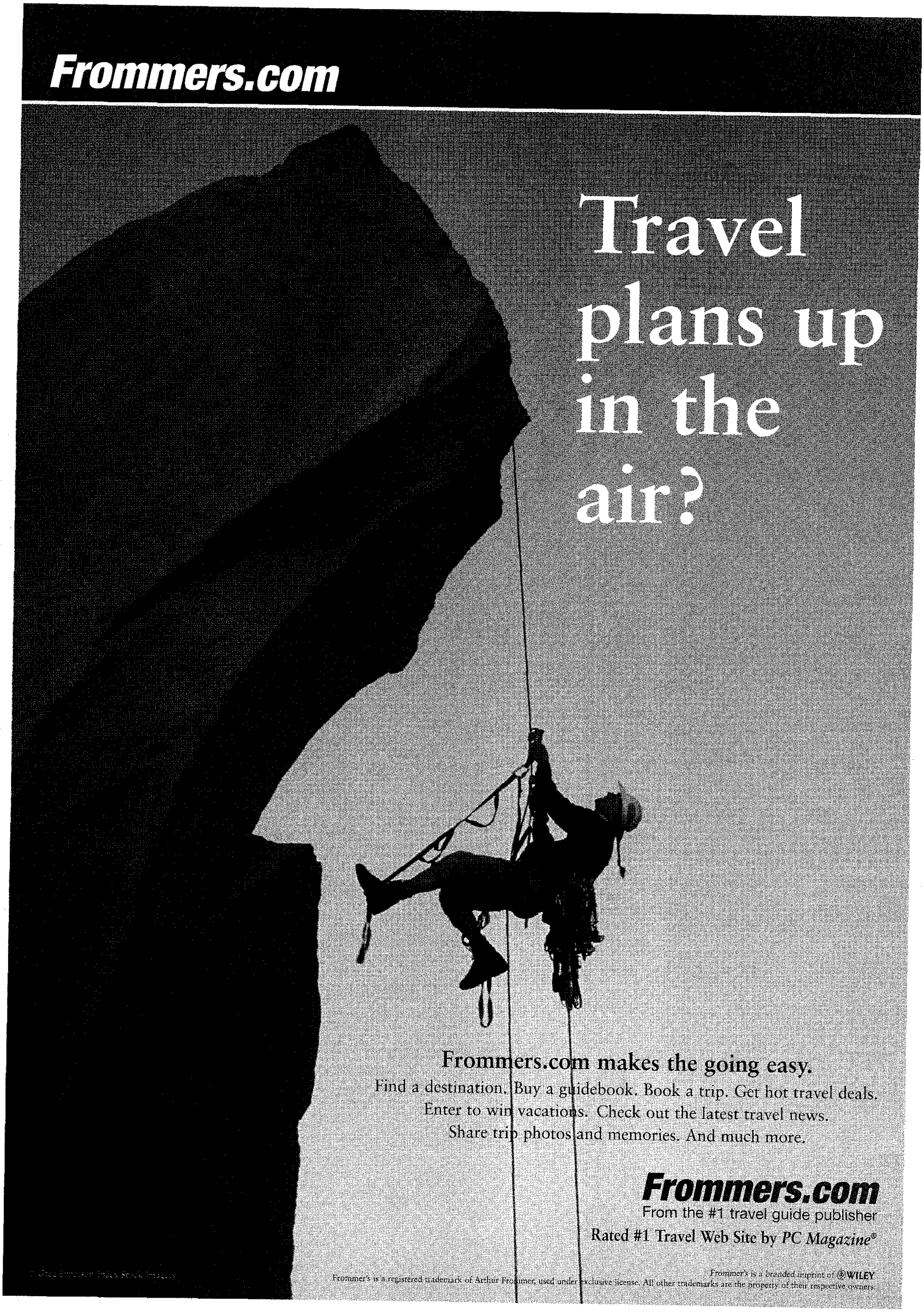
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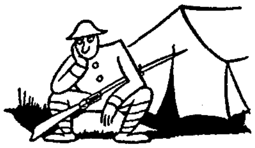
THE
NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

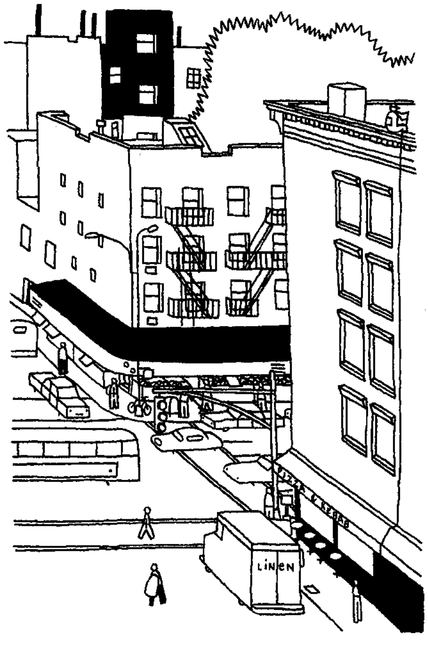
COMMENT
ESCALATION



Last week, in a speech at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, Edward Kennedy said, "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam." The last Kennedy brother—now an aging lion, in his eighth decade of life and his fifth decade in the Senate, a thunderer on a par with his Massachusetts predecessors Daniel Webster and Charles Sumner—then outlined a blistering case that President Bush and his colleagues in the Administration, in almost every area of public policy, have invented or distorted facts to support a radically conservative agenda and have undermined basic standards of candid debate. "As a result, this President has now created the largest credibility gap since Richard Nixon," Kennedy said. "He has broken the basic bond of trust with the American people."

Analogies with the era of Vietnam and Watergate might have been easy to wave away for those inclined to trust a Bush before a Kennedy. But the headlines that followed in the next few days were impossible to dismiss: "UP TO 12 MARINES DIE IN RAID ON THEIR BASE AS FIERCE FIGHTING SPREADS TO 6 IRAQI CITIES" (the *Times*); "UNDER SIEGE" (the *News*); "40 REPORTED KILLED IN FALLUJAH MOSQUE" (Associated Press). As the grim news flowed in, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the deputy director for coalition operations, was suddenly sounding eerily like General William Westmoreland: "We will pacify Fallujah."

Quite a different historical analogy prevails for some Iraqis: the simultaneous, even coördinated, uprising of the Shia and the Sunnis against British forces in 1920, when the League of Nations established the Iraqi state. After three months of fighting, the British prevailed—in the short term. They preserved their imperial prerogatives until 1932 and didn't leave until 1958. History is often propelled by violent minorities, and an enraged Iraqi minority, including both Sunnis and Shia, now appears to view the Americans in Iraq as the British of the nineteen-twenties—heavily armed but on the losing side of history.



LAURENT CILLUFFO

One year after the invasion of Iraq, polls suggest that a slight majority of Iraqis still accept the premise that the United States has no long-term, imperial designs on their country and are glad that Saddam Hussein is in a holding cell somewhere, rather than in one of his palaces. In a poll co-sponsored by ABC News, the BBC, NHK, in Japan, and ARD, in Germany, and published a few weeks ago, forty-eight per cent of Iraqis said that the U.S. was right to invade, while thirty-nine per cent said the opposite. Saddam's record of colossal barbarity was a secret to them only in its details—the precise number of dead and tortured, the location of mass graves—and a future under his sons, Uday and Qusay, was a prospect that few would want to imagine. And yet the sense of liberation, tentative and uneasy but real, that many experienced when American troops entered Baghdad and, later, arrested Saddam has increasingly given way beneath the dispiriting weight of occupation, not merely among insurgents but among ordinary people.

To an extent, this is a familiar pattern. When Western representatives arrived in Kosovo just after the bombing campaign ended terrible Serb violence there, the Kosovar leadership did not betray much warmth toward the visitors from NATO or the United Nations. The dynamic of liberation is rarely one of prolonged gratitude. In Iraq, the reasons for resentment are more varied and more profound. A tyrant is gone, but much of Iraqi society has been reduced, at least sporadically, to a Hobbesian state of chaos and insecurity, subject to kidnappings, car-jackings, revenge killings, suicide bombings, armed militias controlling various urban neighborhoods, the *pop-pop* of gunfire in the distance, and a retreating police force. In the eyes of many Iraqis, the American military presence is at once incapable of maintaining the peace and too at sea to avoid bloody mistakes—mistakes that are then shown over and over on Al Jazeera and other outlets in the region, reinforcing the idea that the United States is an occupier no less brutal than the French in Algeria. The Iraqis do not live at a policy conference in Washington called "The Future of Iraqi Democracy." They live in the present tense, in the midst of this chaos, and for them, lacking the precondition of basic order, the rhetoric of a democratic future is hard to fathom.

The Bush Administration, one recalls with painful irony, came to office disdaining the Clinton crowd as loose, improvisational, incompetent, and without rigor or integrity. The slipperiness of the Bush Administration's preamble to war is, at this point, scarcely debatable. In order to heighten a sense of urgency, its representatives exaggerated the notion of imminent threat by twisting information on weapons of mass destruction and by encouraging a direct connection, in the public's mind, between Saddam and September 11th. The Administration's diplomatic hauteur, its condescending absolutism, left it with a "coalition of the willing," whose size only underscored our relative isolation, and which is now in the process of dissolution.

What we are witness to today—in Fallujah, in Najaf, in Kut, in Basra, in Baghdad—is a consequence of the same insularity and arrogance. The alacrity and skill with which we planned for war has not been matched in our planning for peace. How many mistakes have led to this chaos? At Washington's direction, Iraq's overseer, L. Paul Bremer, disbanded the Iraqi Army, instantly creating a cadre of men who were idle, embittered, and armed. Donald Rumsfeld, with his usual self-possession, dismissed all suggestions that the American military might be dangerously overtaxed and overexposed. The Administration set an arbitrary date of June 30th for the handover of sovereignty, which now seems impossible to shift, lest it cause even more violence. In the management of chaos there is little margin for error. When the Marines fire on a mosque, it is hard to explain to Iraqis and the rest of the Islamic world that the insurgents were using the mosque as cover from which to fire on U.S. troops. Like it or not, the view is reinforced that Iraq is an unambiguous narrative of the oppressor and the oppressed, the occupier and the occupied. That, too, is a condition of life in Iraq today.

Does anyone—save, perhaps, a small core of conservative zealots—still believe that there will be an easy solution to the crisis in Iraq? Perhaps the most discouraging aspect of all this is that, at least until January 20, 2005, George W. Bush is in charge of Iraq's future and America's. Through sheer lack of humility and competence, he has squandered the good will of vast numbers of Iraqis and Americans and American allies, and it is difficult to imagine him acquiring the skill and wisdom to regain it.

John Kerry has yet to present a clear set of ideas about this crisis. As a candidate, he is a sterling biography in search of a coherent language. He must find one. At a moment when Bush is on the defensive as never before—with Iraq, the 9/11 commission, and the critiques of insiders like Richard Clarke and Paul O'Neill—Kerry has seemed to recede. In many respects, the fusillade of attack ads produced by Karl Rove and company are patently unfair and intellectually dishonest, but Kerry has made it too easy for the White House to make him seem vague on Iraq.

Kerry faces a real dilemma. Bumper-sticker clarity is not an option for him. Compared with Bush's simplicities, Kerry's views have been complex. The nuances and conditions of both his original support for authorizing force and his later critique of how that authority was used suggest that he recognizes that Iraq is an American responsibility, not just a Republican one. It falls to Kerry to disprove the conservative zealots' favorite canard: that subtlety of vision is inconsistent with strength and cogency of action.

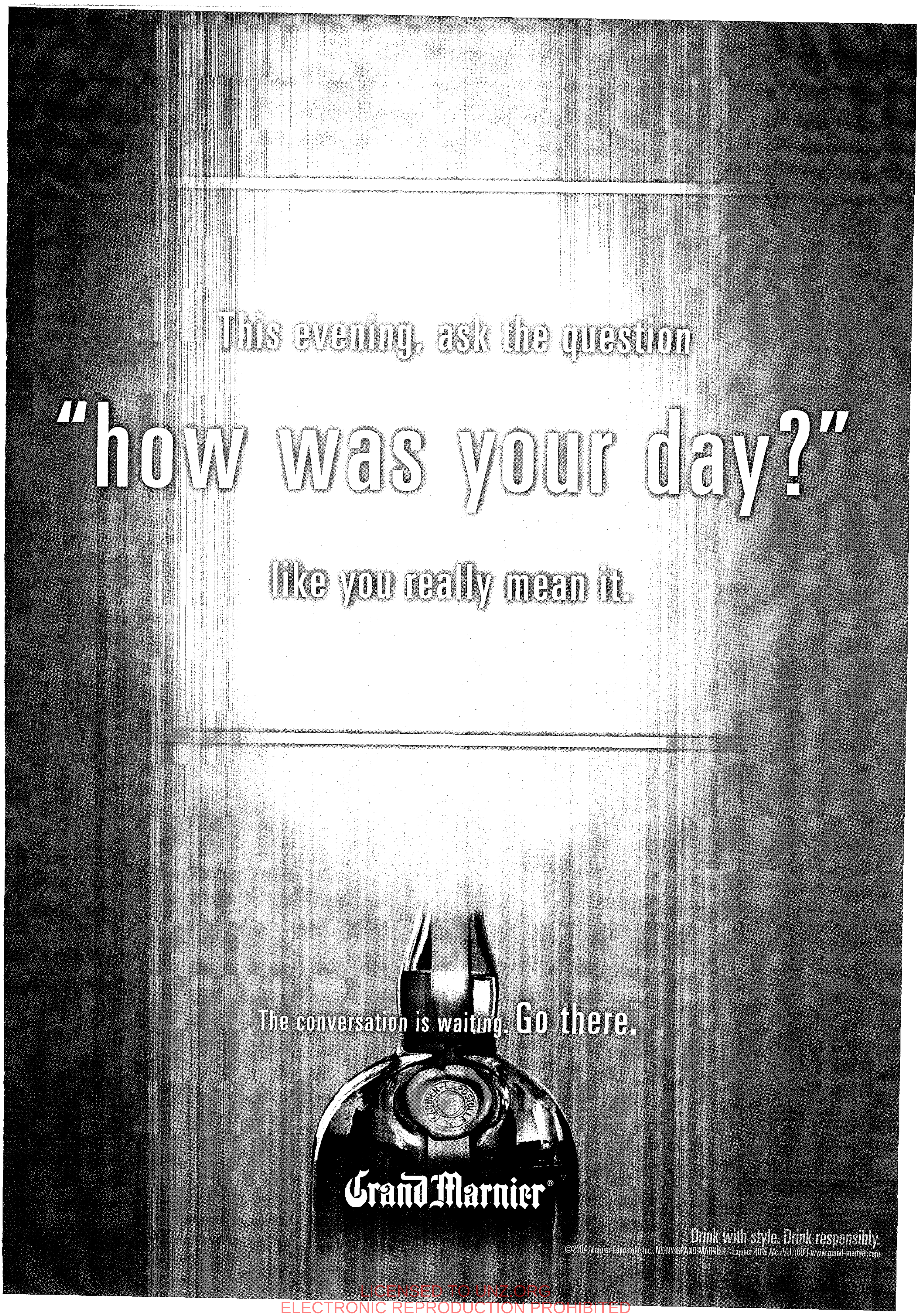
—*David Remnick*

OUR CONSTABULARY WANTED

Do not let it be said that Mayor Bloomberg is weak on job creation. Late last month, a newly appointed mayoral committee began accepting applications for the position of city marshal. The job, obscure and unsalaried, is one of the oldest in local government, dating back to 1655. It has been out of favor for several administrations, however, and no new marshals have been hired since 1989. Ed Koch, who was then the mayor, deemed it "anachronistic" and tried to do away with it. Although state law permits the city to maintain eighty-three marshals, only thirty-eight are working today. Now, in the spirit of bringing free enterprise to public endeavor, Bloomberg is looking to hire some more.

Unlike federal marshals (whose job dates back only to 1789), city marshals are not in the business of transporting prisoners or offering protection, and they have no authority to make an arrest. Technically, they are not even city employees. They operate as independent contractors, and are called upon to enforce civil-court orders. They carry badges (which they pay for themselves), but don't wear uniforms. Practically speaking, they belong somewhere in the extended family of bounty hunters and repo men. When a tenant doesn't pay his rent, it's a city marshal who comes to evict him. When a driver racks up more than two hundred and thirty dollars in parking tickets, a marshal tracks down his car for towing. A marshal must also be an expert at breaking and entering—for those occasions when property needs to be seized.

"This is not a job you and I want," Peter Piscitelli, a lawyer who represents the New York City Marshals Association, said the other day. The work, because of its adversarial nature, can be dangerous. In 2001, a marshal named Erskine Bryce was pushed over the bannister in a Bedford-Stuyvesant apartment building during an attempted eviction; the culprit, a fifty-three-year-old woman who had no intention of giving up her place, then clubbed him with a pipe,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doused him with paint thinner, and set him aflame. If you do get the job, you'll almost certainly want to carry a gun.

Evictions, in general, are not for the faint of heart. Last July, Marshal Edward Guida, entering a house in Astoria, stumbled on a mummy. Danny Weinheim, who carries out about fifteen evictions a day, has occasionally found himself among stray ferrets and roosters in what he calls "almost zoolike apartments."

Naturally, many marshals have come from military or law-enforcement backgrounds, but the new face of city marshals is intended to be a sensitive one. Recommended attributes include "strong communication skills" (Spanish is a plus), "maturity of judgment" (knowing when to call the cops for backup), and "honesty and integrity" (don't pocket the inventory). The application form asks for a five-hundred-word essay describing your best traits ("I am very capable at picking locks because . . .").

A tolerance for banality helps. "If you were owed money—you know, the local cleaners messed up a pair of pants—we're the enforcement arm," Weinheim, who has been a marshal for twenty-seven years, said recently. "We will go to that cleaner and perform a property execution. The cleaners won't be happy with who we are, but you will be."

Compassion for the elderly is important, too. "Many years ago, I had a ninety-three-year-old lady who lived on the top floor of a six-floor walkup and she had a very large dog," Weinheim said. "She couldn't always walk this dog, and she would let this dog defecate in the halls, and obviously it became an issue with the landlord. When I showed up to remove her from her apartment—here was this ninety-three-year-old lady, in the middle of February. I couldn't just put her in the street."

The job does pay well. Although there is no guaranteed income, and you pick up all the overhead costs (car, office, staff), the potential windfall is higher than it is for any other public official. For each service rendered, you get either a fee (say, seventy bucks per towing) or a commission (five per cent of the recovered loot). Incentive works wonders. In 2002, nine of the thirty-eight marshals grossed more than a million dollars. It's a job, in other words, for a real go-getter.

—*Ben McGrath*

THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

PARDON?

Alain de Chalvron, the Washington bureau chief for France 2, the French equivalent of the BBC, hasn't had an easy time since he came to America, last fall. He has had to endure a predictable barrage of remarks regarding freedom fries, Old Europe, and the "Axis of Weasel," along with a reticent White House, which has made it hard for foreign journalists to get briefings. So when John Kerry became the front-runner for the Democratic Presidential nomination de Chalvron and other French journalists in Washington were understandably excited. They knew about Kerry: he went to a Swiss boarding school, he has a cousin who ran for the French Presidency, and he supposedly wooed Teresa Heinz by impressing her with his fluent French.

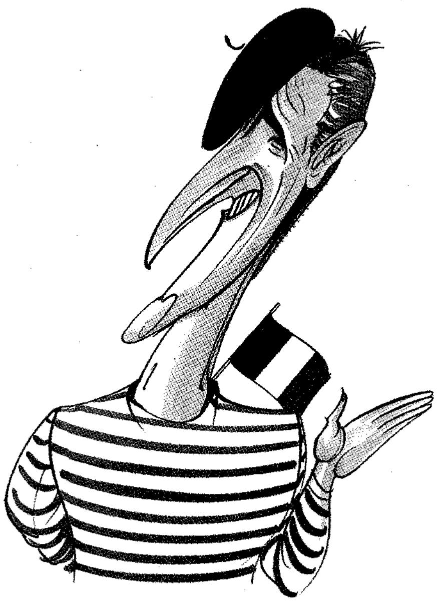
For a time, Kerry seemed equally enthusiastic about the French reporters covering his campaign. "He was quite accessible in Iowa and New Hampshire," de Chalvron said the other day, in his office in Washington. "He understands French very well. His words are correct and sometimes even sophisticated. I asked him, 'How can you have this life? It must be terrible, crisscrossing the country.' Kerry answered, '*C'est affreux*'—'It's awful.'" De Chalvron's voice rose with admiration. "*Affreux*, it's not a very usual word. It's something a French person can use easily, but Kerry could have said, 'Yes, it's terrible,' instead of going to pick a more difficult word."

Everything changed, though, when, in recent months, Republicans started intimating that Kerry was too Continental. Conservatives complained about his touting of endorsements from foreign leaders, and Commerce Secretary Donald L. Evans told reporters that Kerry "looks French." Right-wing talk-show hosts began referring to him as "Monsieur Kerry" and "Jean Cheri." A couple of weeks ago, the Washington *Post* reported that G. Clotaire Rapaille, a French anthropologist known for identifying the subconscious associations that people from various cultures make in the "reptilian" part of their brains, had offered to become the Senator's Gallic Naomi Wolf, devising ways for him to rid his speaking style of French influences.

Suddenly, Kerry appeared to develop linguistic amnesia. "During a press conference, I asked Kerry a question, on Iraq," de Chalvron recalled. "He didn't answer. In front of the American journalists, he didn't want to take a question that was not in English." Loïck Berrou, the United States bureau chief for de Chalvron's competitor, TF1, has been having similar problems. Berrou chatted in French with Kerry on a commercial flight last year; the Senator reminisced about his family's country house in Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, a village in Brittany, where Kerry's cousin is the mayor. "We've pushed hard to get an interview with him, and no answer," Berrou says.

Family members have apparently been put on a leash as well. Kerry's wife, Berrou says, "speaks with us in French with no problem, and her press attaché has to pull her by the shirt to get her away from us."

The English-only rule doesn't seem to hold when Kerry is speaking off the record. On his campaign plane recently, he carried on a lively conversation with de Chalvron in French. The other day, in his office, de Chalvron showed footage of Kerry bringing hot towels to foreign journalists in the back of the plane and bantering with Parisian reporters about his chances. De Chalvron was perplexed. "For us, to speak any other language and have an open view of the world, for a President, should be a plus," he said.



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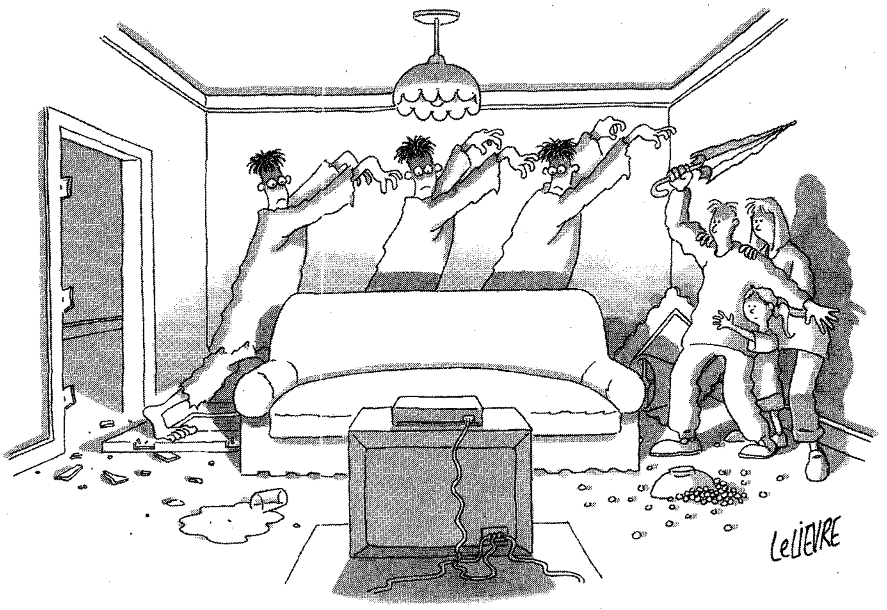

The zombies were halfway across the living room when they noticed that "Friends" was on.

• •

As for an on-the-record interview, de Chalvron is still trying, but Kerry's campaign has not responded. He did, however, recently land an interview with Pat Robertson, who told him, "Jean François Kerry will never be elected."

—*Joshua Kurlantzick*

CAMPUS POSTCARD
A PILE OF PAPER

One evening in February, two Stanford University seniors, Steve Yelderman and Ian Spiro, were presiding over the weekly staff meeting of *The Stanford Chaparral*, the college's humor magazine. Spiro, a thin and gangly computer-science major with a mop of brown hair, thick sideburns, and metal-frame glasses, was about to unveil his radical idea for the annual *Chaparral* parody issue.

Typical *Chaparral* issues are glossy compendiums of cartoons, lists, dialogues, photo journals, and short articles, but once each year, in the grand collegiate-humorist tradition, the editors produce a parody of a national magazine. In its hundred-and-five-year history, *The Chaparral* has targeted such publications as *Fortune, Sports Illustrated,* and *Playboy.* Yelderman and Spiro, however, felt that the genre had been exhausted. At the meeting, Yelderman, an athletic-looking electrical-engineering major who wears hip-nerd plastic glasses, announced the solution: "This year, rather than parodying *National Geographic* or *Saturday Morning Cartoon* magazine, we're going to be parodying an unbound pile of paper."

Spiro broke in. "Most magazines come bound, with a staple," he said. "We're trying to do something that's never been done. We've already got a pretty good Chinese menu going."

Staffers began tossing out story ideas—scratch-off lottery tickets, rejection letters, instructional manuals, cult solicitation pamphlets. "There's been a lot of talk of applications, or rejection letters," Yelderman said. "Maybe a pre-rejection from Harvard Law School?"

"How about a PowerPoint presentation?" someone called out.

"How about a *werewolf* PowerPoint presentation?" someone else countered. "It could have silver bullet points."

A few people brought up distribution questions: what would distinguish the Pile of Paper issue from, say, a pile of garbage? Before long, a list of story ideas had been generated, and the concept had evolved from a random collection of papers to one found on a particular person's desk. "We started to see a character emerge," Yelderman said.

A couple of weeks after the first meeting, Spiro and Yelderman held a marathon writing session; the plan called for *Chaparral* staffers to work all weekend and to complete the Pile of Paper issue by Monday morning. They had given the presumptive owner of the Pile of Paper a name—Ronald Rembrandt DeLa Duffy—and filled out much of his profile. He was something of a loser, as suggested by job-rejection letters from AeroMexico, a disciplinary letter from the Federal Communications Commission (for using profanity on his cell phone), and pathetic to-do lists. He had received a variety of odd pamphlets and advertisements, including one offering the "Power of Inconvenience™" and another for "Feria, Mild Neural Toxin" (the product's slogan: "Is he too talkative?"). He had come into possession of the bizarre Chinese menu and the WolfCo PowerPoint presentation.

The parody, however, seemed to move further from completion as Sunday wore on. "Normally, we have the content a little more under control at this point," Spiro said. The problem was that almost anything lying around the office offered a potential story. Just after 6 P.M., Yelderman decided to make a mockup of a printer test page, the document that prints to show that a printer is working properly.

"Just because we can print a printer test page, that doesn't mean we should," a staffer complained.

"I don't know if anyone has ever published one in the history of publications," Spiro replied.

"No one has ever printed a picture of my ass before, either."

The editors agreed to table the idea, and everyone went back to work. Spiro and another student spent several hours trying to find the right tone for a pro-smoking advertisement, titled "When History Happens . . . Smoking Is There."

By 8 A.M., nearly all the stories were completed. Spiro and Yelderman decided to call it a night. As the staff wandered out, someone asked if anyone still thought the Pile of Paper idea was funny. "I think it's hilarious," Spiro said. He picked up the finished stack of stories and flipped through it. "In some sense, we have succeeded in our rudimentary goal. I mean, this is a pile of paper."

—*Evan Ratliff*

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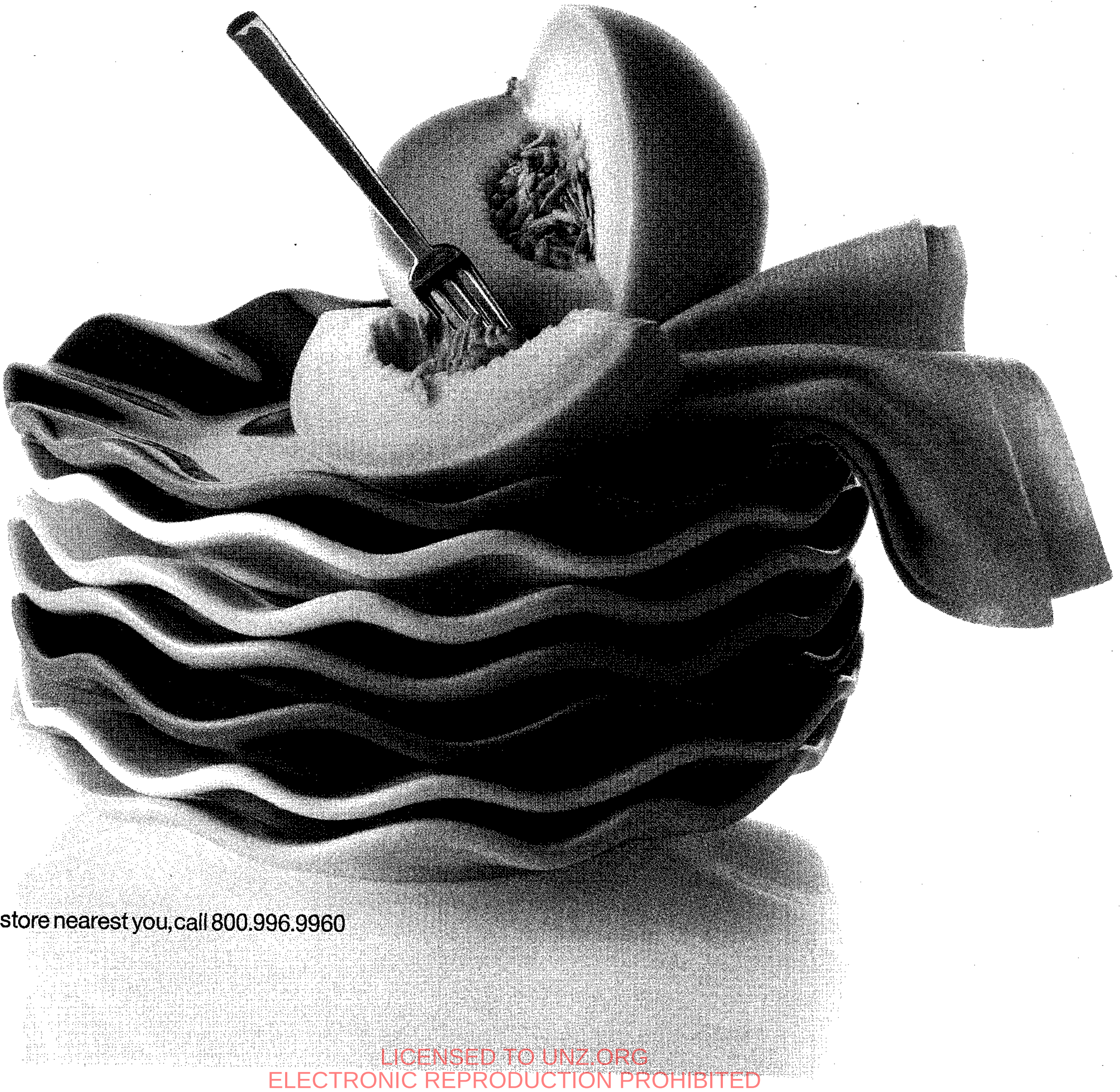

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
HAIL TO THE GEEK

In the early nineteen-thirties, as the American economy fell to pieces, policymakers in Washington had a serious problem: they had no idea what was happening. They knew that things were bad, but they didn't know how bad, because they had almost no dependable information about the economy as a whole. So Congress, the White House, and the Federal Reserve Board were stuck scrutinizing such thin indicators as steel production, stock prices, and the public pronouncements of Henry Ford.

That changed in 1933, when a small staff of government researchers, led by an economist named Simon Kuznets, came up with a new statistic, which they called "national income." Though crude by modern standards, it was the first reliable measure of national economic performance in American history. Within a few years, the Commerce Department had invented the gross national product and had started analyzing the economy by industry and region, while other agencies were devising ways of tracking inflation and unemployment. Today, the government provides as much solid, objective economic information and analysis in a month as it used to in a decade.

This steady flow of data is easy to take for granted; few things, surely, are as dreary as a soybean-export-price index. But the economy depends on these numbers; they make business smoother and policy smarter. (Recessions after the Second World War, for instance, have lasted about half as long as recessions before it.) This is why, ever since the days of Kuznets, the government's basic assumption, at least when it comes to economic data, has been: the more information, the better, no matter how dismal it may be.

The Bush Administration has adopted a different approach: what you don't know won't hurt you. Consider Thomas Scully, who was, until recently, the head of Medicare and the point man in the White House's effort to get its drug benefit through Congress. Last spring, Richard Foster, Medicare's chief actuary, analyzed the Bush proposal and estimated that it would cost five hundred and fifty billion dollars over a decade: roughly a hundred and fifty billion more than the President had said it would. Scully, knowing that Congress was already leery about the price tag, and that Foster's estimate might sink the bill, made sure that the numbers never got out. As Foster recalls it, Scully said that he'd fire him if they did. Foster kept his mouth shut, and the bill passed the House by one vote. Last January, the Office of Management and Budget issued its own estimate, which echoed Foster's. The bill is expected to cost well over five hundred billion dollars.

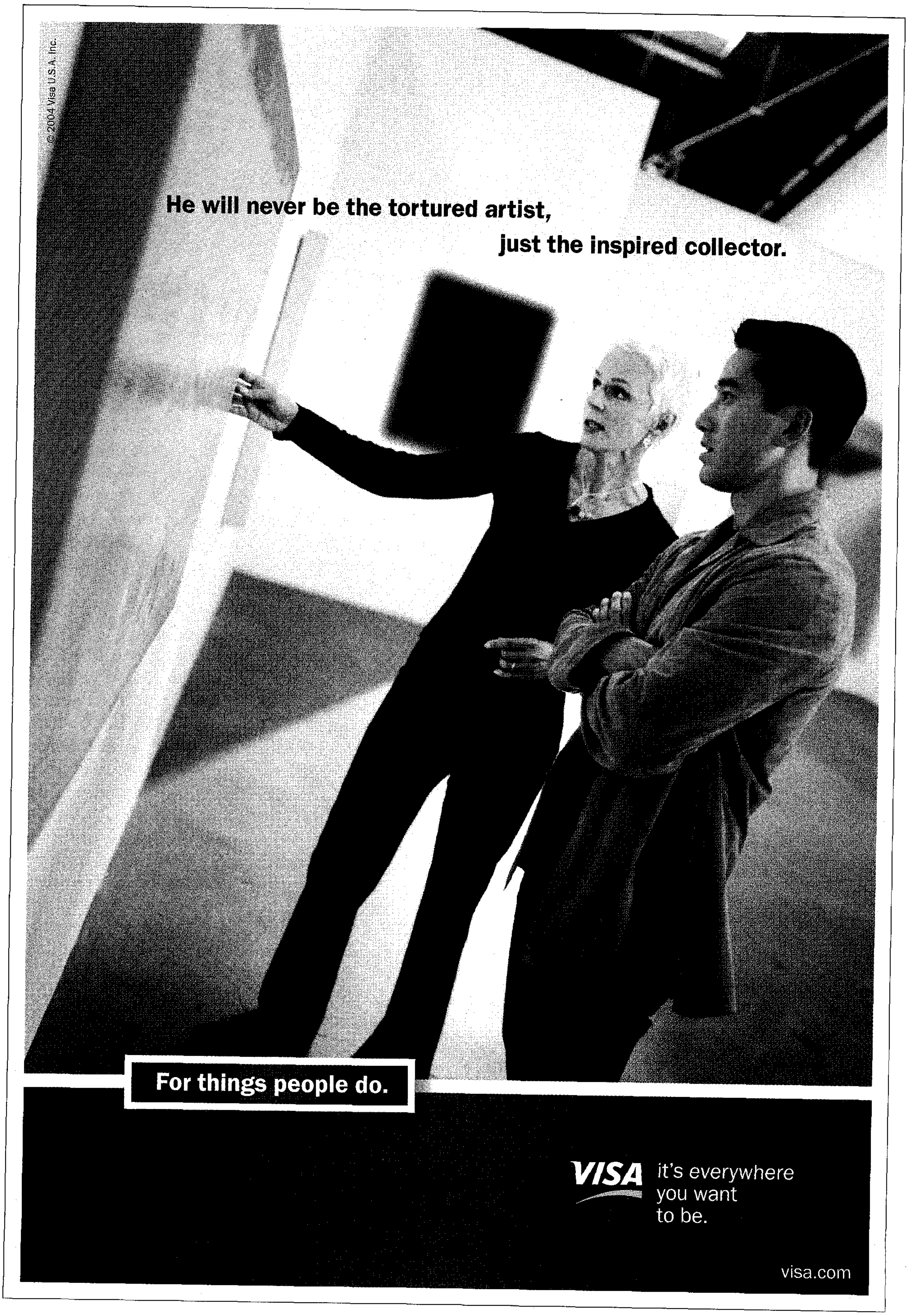
Statistical expediency and fiscal obfuscation have become hallmarks of this White House. In the past three years, the Bush Administration has had the Bureau of Labor Statistics stop reporting mass layoffs. It shortened the traditional span of budget projections from ten years to five, which allowed it to hide the long-term costs of its tax cuts. It commissioned a report on the aging of the baby boomers, then quashed it because it projected deficits as far as the eye could see. The Administration declined to offer cost estimates or to budget money for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A recent report from the White House's Council of Economic Advisers included an unaccountably optimistic job-growth forecast, evidently guided by the Administration's desire to claim that it will have created jobs. And a few weeks ago the Treasury Department put civil servants to work—at Tom DeLay's request—evaluating a tax proposal identical to John Kerry's, then issued a press release saying that the proposal would raise taxes on "hardworking individuals." (Lazy individuals breathed a sigh of relief.)

Politics as usual? Not really. Hard as it may be to believe, in economic matters the executive branch has traditionally succeeded at hewing to the ideals of objectivity and nonpartisanship. Under Republicans and Democrats, in good times and bad, the Commerce Department and the Labor Department have produced reliable numbers, even when those numbers have made sitting Presidents look worse. Presidents have tried to put their spin on the data, of course, and there have been notable episodes of deliberate manipulation, as when Lyndon Johnson moved the Social Security Trust Fund into the general budget, or when David Stockman fabricated numbers in the first Reagan budget. On the whole, though, good economics has trumped politics.

The people who have made this possible are among the most heavily scorned figures in American life—George Wallace's "pointy-headed bureaucrats." Career civil servants are easy targets: protective of their bailiwick, certain of their indispensability, diminished by their sinecure. But what makes them assailable also makes them valuable. They're the only professionals in government—the only ones who can say what they think instead of what they believe their bosses or voters want them to. Their long tenures foster expertise and make nonpartisanship possible. Would we trust the unemployment numbers if, every time a new President came along, he replaced the entire Bureau of Labor Statistics with a new crop of cronies and campaign aides?

With the military, we expect colonels and lieutenants to be indifferent to the exigencies of party politics, so that they can, as the saying goes, just do their jobs. We don't want them to be ward heelers. The same should hold true for government actuaries and economists. When Foster looked at the cost of the drug bill, he was trying to figure out what was true. Scully, meanwhile, was trying to figure what he could sell. Politics may need people willing to ask the second question, but government needs people willing to ask the first.

—*James Surowiecki*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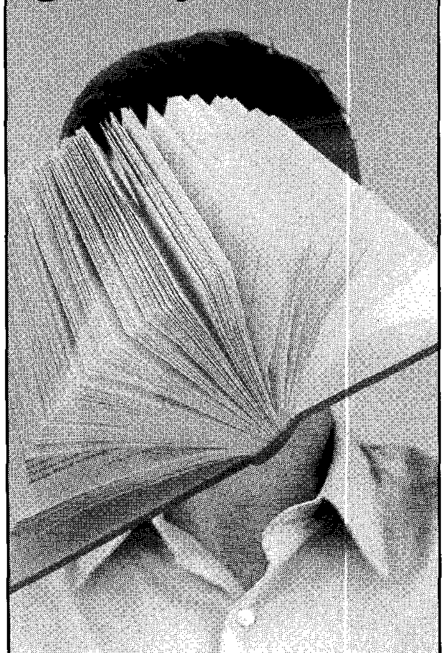

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

HE, THE MURDERER

BY IAN FRAZIER

The murderer can't find a parking space. A hard morning spent murdering people, and now this. He has errands to run, the murderer. What a week he's had, and it's only Thursday. Just look at his schedule:

Monday	murder somebody
Tuesday	murder somebody
Wednesday	sit around
Thursday	murder somebody; do errands

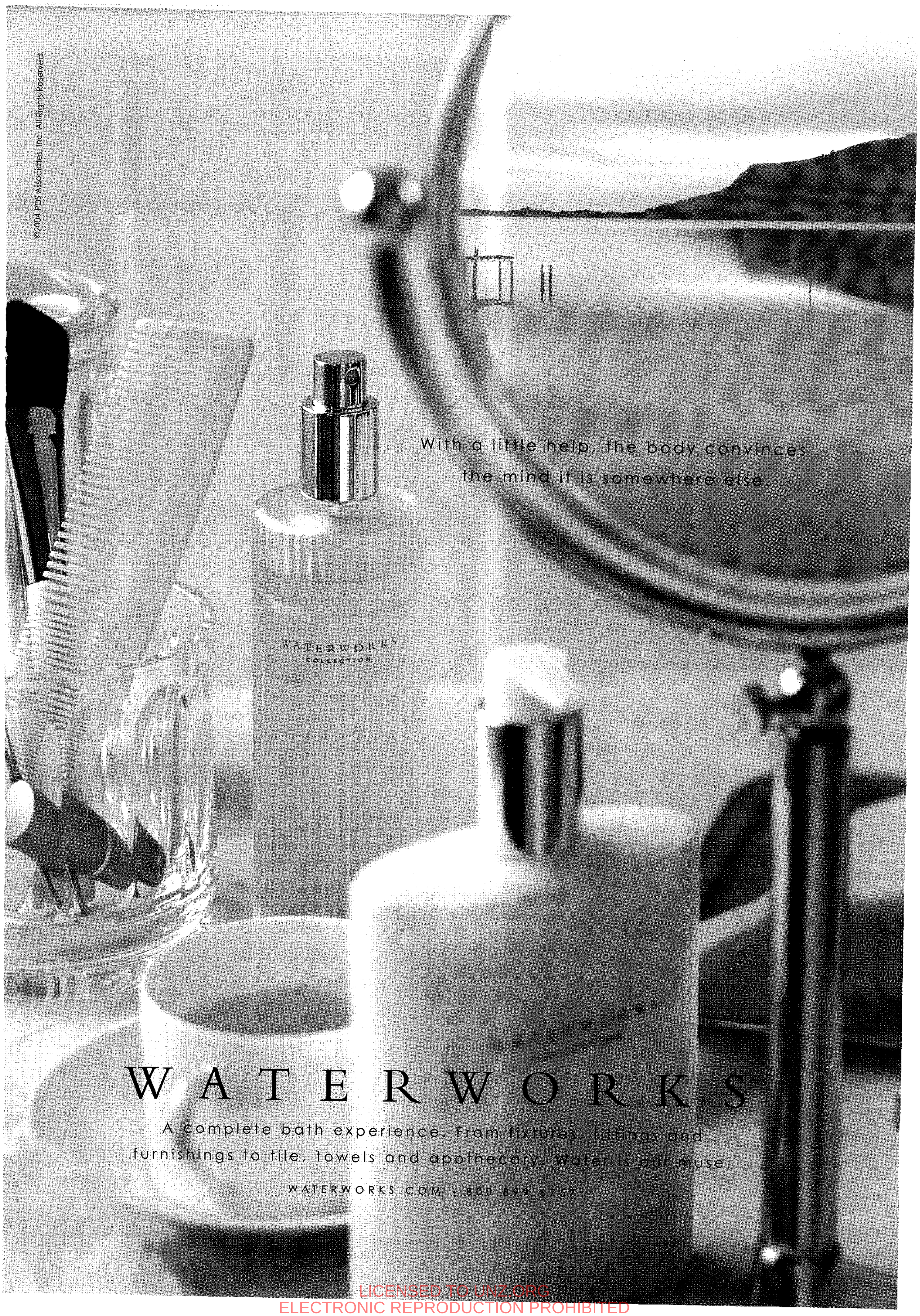
The average person has no idea what a murderer goes through, the murderer thinks, shaking his head ruefully. All you ever hear about are the victims. Being a murder victim is tough, no question about that. But, afterward, who gets stuck with the cleanup? This particular murderer is a complicated person, not an animal like some murderers. He drives to Costco to buy shower-curtain rings on a Thursday afternoon, same as anybody. And now some jerk has taken up two spaces, when the parking lot is completely full! The murderer thinks people who do that should be murdered.

To himself, he doesn't use the word "murdered." He uses the word "whacked," or, sometimes, "taken out." Hey, he's not an English professor—he's a murderer. Actually, for a while when he was younger he wanted to be an English professor. Enrolled in college courses and everything. He got a lot out of it—"The Faerie Queene." Weird to think he ever read a book with a title like that. The life wasn't right for him, though. On an aptitude test, "Murderer" was the category he scored highest in. By then, he'd already murdered a couple of guys, just fooling around. He kind of liked it. One thing led to another.

Now he wishes he'd murdered more people when he was younger. You reach the age of forty, forty-five, and you can't react like you used to when you were twenty. Just starting out as a young murderer, he was amazing, with a new move every time. He'd be talking to one person, threatening to murder him, and then all of a sudden he'd reach around and shoot the guy standing next to him right in the head. Nobody'd ever done that before. He'd shoot guys over his shoulder or through his legs, shoot them while he was on the telephone ordering the contract murders of other guys. He was doing what everybody secretly would love to do if they weren't too scared, and it gave him an adrenaline rush. And then somewhere along the way it started to become a chore.

Everybody's got his hand out these days, wanting a favor. "Hey, Ronnie, can you murder my nephew?" "Ronnie, my man, if you got a second, could you murder the head of the Plumbers and Contractors Union?" "Yo, Uncle Ronnie, how about doing a little murdering for us, pro bono?" Like always, friends and family take advantage. The murderer tries to help out when he can. He's an obliging guy. He also has a surprisingly strong set of family values. Been married for twenty-two years to the same woman—Felicity, a skilled murderess. In her day, she won some real street cred, the murderer fondly recalls. Now she's retired, or semi-retired. She was something: used to confuse people with gymnastics, and then—*chop!*—cut them almost in half with a big sword. She's put on weight since then, so now she uses fertilizer bombs. When she still murders people, that is, which is seldom.

The murderer and his wife have a son whom he adores. The murderer's face softens and gets very tender when he thinks about him. Always calls him "my boy." To hear him talk about that son of his would break your heart, if he weren't murdering you. He is determined that his son will not have to murder people



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when he gets big, and will be able to make a good living simply by injuring them. Right now, that is his dream. Sometimes he'll come home in the evening, blood still under his fingernails, and sit down at the dining-room table with his son to help him build a model plane or finish a spelling assignment. No human being is easy to explain. The murderer doesn't pretend to be.

At this point, some errors should be cleared up. When the murderer earlier allowed the inference that he planned to shop at Costco, he misspoke. In fact, he never intended to shop there, and he considers it a place for idiots and mooks. Instead he planned to shop at a home-furnishings store that he prefers not to be too specific about. O.K., it was Home Depot. So now the murderer goes into Home Depot, finds the items he came for, buys them, goes back to the parking lot, murders somebody (the guy who took up two spaces—serves him right), and leaves the guy laying on the asphalt. (Note to grammarians, re the "lie-lay" solecism: *Give up*, already! You've lost!) The dead guy is laying there all shot up, one eye hanging from the socket like some goofy Halloween mask, plasma already separating out of the pool of blood beside him, flies buzzing around. Murderer gets in his car and drives off.

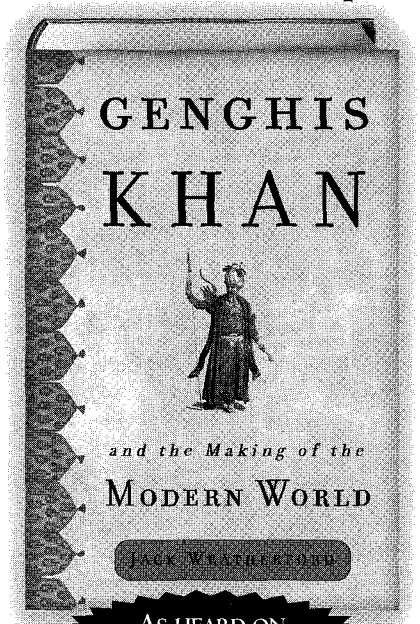
It's funny the things you remember. This thought crosses the murderer's mind as he maneuvers his car along the familiar streets of his suburban neighborhood.

Yes, it's funny the things you remember.

Now the murderer hears the sound of a helicopter right overhead. This problem again! The murderer begins to drive fast and run over pedestrians and fruit stands. Coincidentally, a number of other murderers in the vicinity at that time are also trying to get away from law-enforcement agencies who are after them. Some of the murderers are running from the F.B.I., some from the C.I.A., some from Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and a few just from the local police. Many of the streets the murderer usually takes when pursued are closed due to police actions. While backing up from a roadblock and making a turn on two wheels, the murderer crashes into two other murderers. He gets out of his car and murders them, saving the state the trouble. Then he walks over to several U.S. Marshals who have screeched to a stop nearby and he patiently explains the circumstances and who he is. Impressed, they loan him one of their unmarked cars so he can go home.

A couple of blocks away, the murderer has second thoughts and goes back and murders the marshals, also. No point in taking chances, and anyway, why not? Today is a special day. Today the murderer's son turns nine years old. The murderer and his wife have been planning the party for months. He passes a novelty store and stops in to buy some paper hats. At the cash register, he flirts with the salesgirl, and she responds warmly. The truth is, aside from the killing, the murderer has a basically good heart. People sense that about him, and if they survive they are drawn to him. Deep, deep under that blood-and-tissue-spattered exterior is a giving and generous man.

Who are you to judge him, anyhow? You have probably committed a few murders yourself, though you won't acknowledge it. Think back. When you put rat poison in the food of a business rival, and he later ate the food and died, you share in the responsibility, however indirectly, for his death. Each one of us has similar uncomfortable episodes in our past. The very fact that we are still walking the planet is a good indication that at some previous moment we deliberately caused someone's death to benefit our own lives. So it's better not to look too closely beneath the veil. That is why we need the murderer. He is us, minus our false fronts, shame, and "law-abiding" behavior. In fact, let's be even more honest than we were being before. We not only resemble the murderer, and need the murderer, we like and admire the murderer and think he's so great that we would want him for a friend. We hope he keeps murdering, at his own discretion, as many murder victims as he wants, except for our own family and friends (or most of them). A lifetime of murdering has given the murderer a wisdom and a higher consciousness that the rest of timid humanity will never understand. He's a murderer, O.K.? Let him be. ♦



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AS HEARD ON "ALL THINGS CONSIDERED"

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ON THE BARK

The life and hard times of the standup hopeful.

BY ADRIAN NICOLE LEBLANC

Late one Saturday night in January, at Ha! Comedy Club, on West Forty-sixth Street, Peyton Clarkson learned what it was to bomb. Peyton, a blond, blue-eyed twenty-three-year-old from Alabama, had been performing at Ha! for only a month and a half, but he'd had so many "spots" onstage—about twenty five-minute performances a week—that he'd already gained more experience than many young comics get in a year. Still, there's no substitute for public humiliation.

Peyton is soft-spoken in person but energetic and swingy when he's onstage. Like a lot of aspiring comics, he'd always been the class clown; at Auburn University, he was considered the funniest guy in his fraternity. After graduation, Peyton went to New York to become an actor. During the day, he waited on tables at a restaurant in Trump Tower and went on casting calls. Every night, on the way home from his second job—running the discount-ticket lottery for "Rent"—he would pass Ha!

The comedy world is a small one, and Ha! has a reputation as a home for starting comics, most of whom find their way there by word of mouth. Ha! also hosts an open-mike night once a week, during which hopefuls can audition for the club. The first time Peyton went, he got such a bad attack of stomach cramps that he left before his turn and ran the two blocks home, to Forty-seventh Street; the second time, he made it through his set and was told that he was good enough to bark—to distribute flyers to passersby and get them to come to the club. In return for getting two people to a show, Peyton would have a five-minute set.

Ha! has two stages. The main one, on the ground floor, is larger and is considered tougher, because the audience members feel more anonymous; the farther away people are from the comic, the more comfortable they are shouting out or creating their own private parties. In the lounge upstairs, Peyton had never lost the audience. The room is more intimate, with high barstool tables lining two of the walls, and lower tables surrounding a tiny stage. On this January night, though, the proximity worked against him. Even his boyish comedic style—a naïve pose with lots of gesturing and miming—failed to elicit the protective feeling he often gets from an audience.

"This motherfucker ain't gonna be funny," a woman said before Peyton even reached the stage.

"My name is Peyton Clarkson," he began.

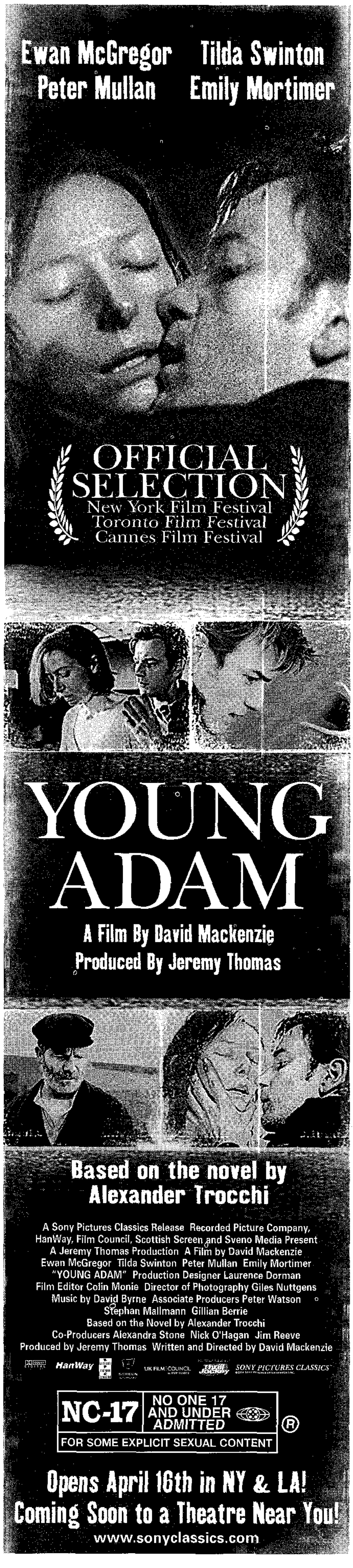
"This motherfucker's *stupid*," the woman said loudly. Peyton glanced at her boyfriend, hoping that he might shut her up, but he didn't say anything.

"My friends call me Consti-peyton," he continued, with less than his usual intended dopiness. The woman shook her head, disgusted. He went into the first full joke: "Everybody in my family is a really, really big drinker, or really, really homosexual. I personally prefer the drink over the pink, but you can bet I know how to make one hell of a Cosmo." It didn't get a laugh. Usually, the silence was only a pause, broken by laughter when he went into the character—narrowing his eyes and pursing his lips as he limply held a Martini glass. But this time the silence grew. And then Peyton made a serious mistake.

If you are going to address a heckler, you have to be sure that the audience is on your side—that it wants the heckler to be put down. And you have to be ready to say something funny that will end the exchange on your terms. Peyton appealed to the woman's mercy. "What have I done to you?" he asked. "Why are you so mad at me?"

"Stop it—just go to the next one," the woman said, her eyes down.

He tried, pulling his jokes from nowhere, out of order. "But what did I do?" Peyton asked the woman desperately, when it became clear that he'd lost the crowd. "Why are you so angry and bitter?"



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As barkers, Peyton Clarkson and Liz Miele get stage time if they bring customers into the club. Photograph by Mary Ellen Mark.

"You just get on with your show," she said. "Don't worry about me—just go on with the show."

The m.c. flashes a red light when a comic has one minute left, and comics generally try to use up every second of the remaining time. That night, when the light was flashed, Peyton got offstage quickly, hot with shame. Despite a recent rule at the club that comedians can't drink during work, the club's manager, Francisco Aldorando, had a shot waiting for him at the bar. "I really screwed up," Peyton said later. "I was her bitch."

When Peyton emerged from the club to go home, around 2 A.M., a group of comedians were clustered beneath the club's red awning, smoking. It was an awkward moment: everyone knew that he had bombed. Just then, a Hummer limousine turned the corner at Forty-sixth Street and cruised down the empty block. "See that?" Francisco called out to Peyton, who was by then on the sidewalk.

Peyton turned back toward his colleagues, bracing himself: comics can be astonishingly cruel to one another.

"Someday, you're gonna be in there, with a bunch of strippers," Francisco said. "And I'll be driving."

Peyton looked grateful but baffled. "Thanks."

"It happens."

All comedians need stage time—to keep sharp, to try out new material, to remember who they are—but tyros need it to become comedians. Unlike writing, or painting, standup comedy can't be practiced alone; the pacing and the direction are influenced by incremental responses from the audience. Some comics say that you have to repeat a joke forty or fifty times just to get the feel of it in your mouth. Even before beginners can start to

refine their material, they have to tackle the basic physical challenges—figuring out where to put their hands, how to hold the mike and move around without getting tangled in the cord, how to breathe without its seeming like a sound effect. Then, they have to learn how to work the audience: how to deal with hecklers; when to go out on a limb to bring a crowd back and when to wait for it to return. Some audience members laugh at whatever they find funny, but plenty of people take their cues from others, and sometimes, if the room is quiet, a comedian might look for an anchor, usually a couple who are laughing; if he can hold them, they effectively give other people permission to join in. Eventually, you take on challenges of a slightly higher level: learning to get comfortable enough onstage to play around with your set, inserting ad-libs and riffs and "call backs"—lines that return to the themes of earlier bits.

While the pros refine their material on the road or on the élite circuit, newcomers work on their basic skills as they move among a string of dingy rooms—often a different place every night. A-list clubs, when they use amateurs at all, are careful to identify them as such to the audience, and confine them to brief intervals between the professional sets. This is where Ha! distinguishes itself: in a ninety-minute show, fully a third of the time might be given over to the barkers, each of whom will do a spot lasting between four and nine minutes. Ha! has thereby established itself as something of a clubhouse for aspiring comics. It isn't where you want to end up, but it's a place to start.

The youngest barker at Ha! is Liz Miele, who is eighteen. Though she's an unknown on the comedy circuit, she's certain that she has been immortalized by hundreds of visitors from around the world in their snapshots of Times Square: she's the short (just over five feet) girl with long curly hair in the background, wearing a bandanna and clutching a stack of Ha! discount flyers. (Barkers write their initials on each flyer, so that they are credited with the customers they bring in.) "A lot of Mexicans want to take pictures of me—I'm probably known as a prostitute," Liz says. On an evening in January, however, she was barely visible beneath her winter clothes. She was on the bark, and the temperature had dropped to seventeen degrees.

"Standup comedy!" she called out.

A woman paused. "Which way is Forty-fourth?" Liz pointed her in the right direction.

A family stopped. "Do you know where Toys R Us is?" She did.

She continued her barking. "Standup comedy. Be a friend, take a flyer! Ladies get in free." Liz's sidewalk persona is a lot like her stage one; she looks pleasant and helpful, but her tone is deadpan, almost expressionless.

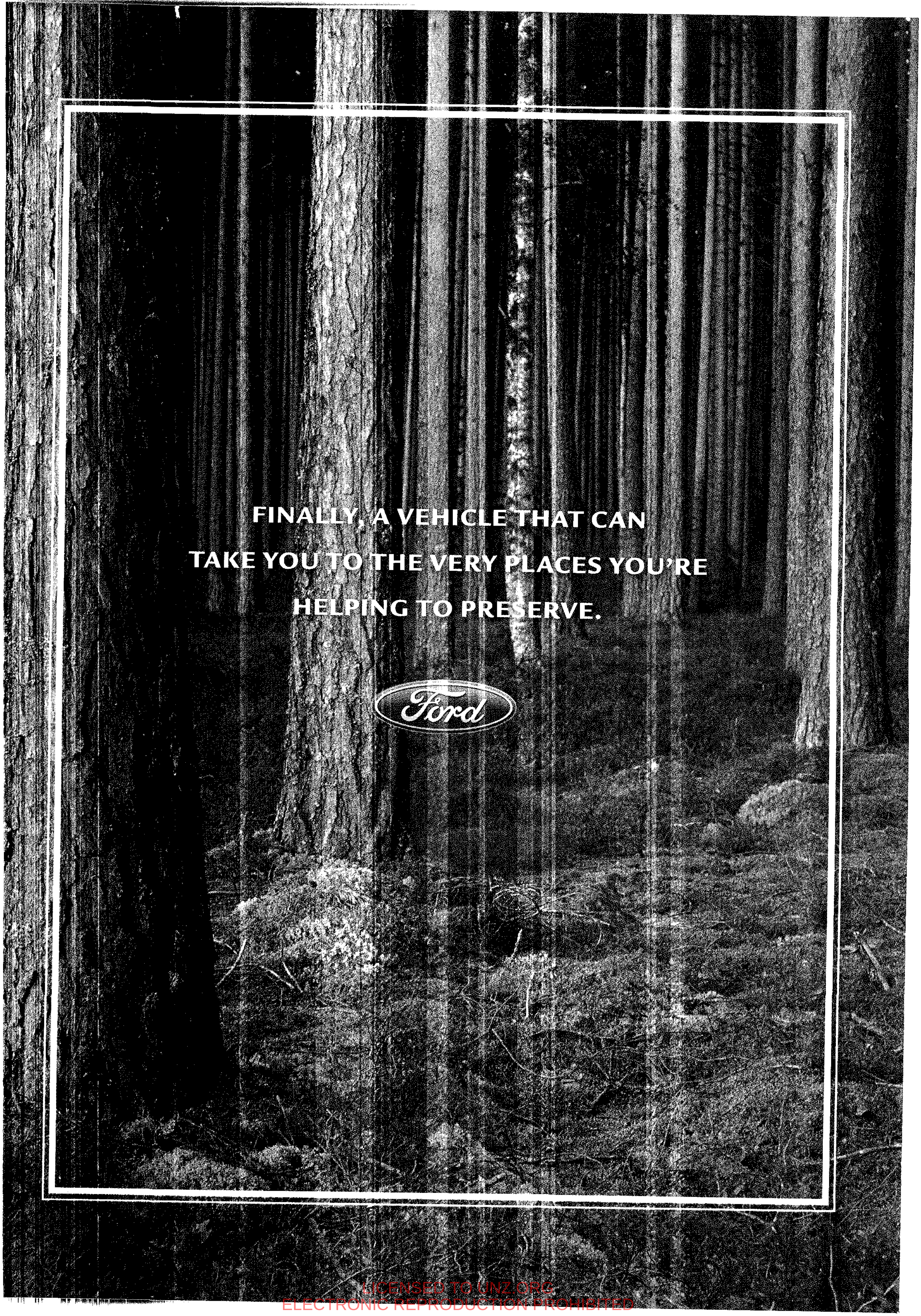
Inevitably, passersby made cracks, all of which she'd heard a thousand times: "How about sit-down comedy?" "Make me laugh." "We got all the comedy we need right here."

"At first, it's funny, then you start to hate them," Liz said. Even after eight months of barking, the harsh exposure gets to her: "A little piece of me dies every time I go out."

For the past few months, the sidewalk outside Howard Johnson's at Forty-sixth Street and Broadway has been her main barking spot. Liz has learned to avoid standing under the "Stomp" billboard, where pigeons like to perch. She used to stand in front of the Marriott to stay close to the policemen, but then she got to know John, who passed out cards for a strip club called Flashdancers and swore, every night, that he was going to quit. She has also become friendly with a nearby hot-dog vender who keeps the creepier drunks away.

Weird things happen on the bark. Groups of kids sometimes see barkers as free amusement and grab their flyers; a fetishist offered a barker a hundred dollars for his dirty socks; a drug dealer tried to recruit another, impressed by his salesmanship. One man took a flyer, blew his nose on it, and handed it back. A teenager took one of Peyton's flyers and told him that if he didn't have a good time he was going to come back and shoot him in the face. Even without celebrity, Liz has already had a stalker; the man managed to track down her family's phone number, in New Jersey. After that, she promised her parents that she'd take a cab to her dorm room, downtown, at the end of her late nights.

"A lot of who I am is because of my dad," Liz says. Her parents are both veterinarians, and own three animal hospitals. James Miele wakes at 4 A.M. and e-mails his children and staff daily inspirational quotes from his extensive self-help library: "Awaken the Giant Within," "The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari," "The Power of Now." His take on the second law of thermodynamics is a particular favorite: "Unless you put energy into the system, it's going to go to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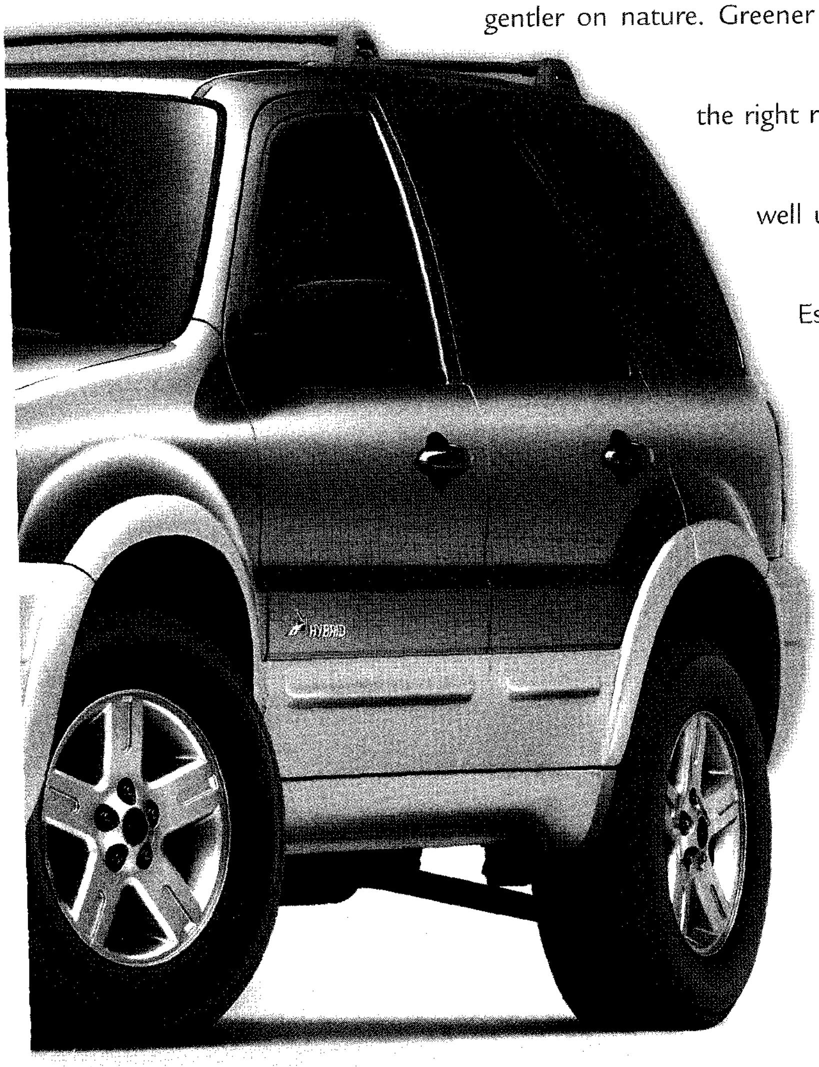

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maximum disorganization." Shortly before Christmas, Liz told her father that she felt her momentum had stalled, and he responded with a four-page memo.

Liz decided at fifteen that she wanted to be a comic; during high school, she wrote letters to every comic and comedy writer that she could track down and asked for career advice. One afternoon, George Carlin called. They spoke for fifteen minutes and he gave her pointers, though she was too excited to remember what he said.

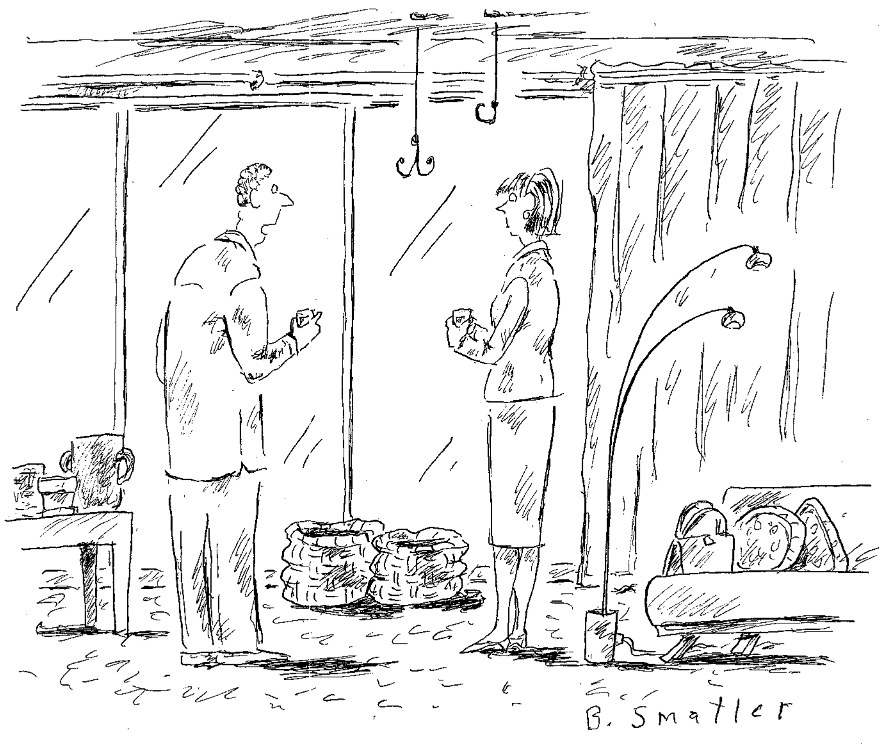
Not long afterward, she learned about "bringers," where you get stage time in return for bringing in audience members—usually people you know. During the school year, she did bringer shows twice a month in New York, corralling teachers, friends, and the staff of her parents' animal clinics. By summer, she was doing a bringer every week. For the first nine months, afraid for her safety, her father supervised the expeditions to the city. Liz wouldn't allow him to watch her perform, so he waited out her sets at Starbucks. During her senior year, Liz began barking for Ha! whenever she could, and, in the summer before she started college, at the New School, she was doing twenty shows a week.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays are now her class days, but she still does eleven shows a week at Ha! In December, she started dating another Ha! comic, Greg Barris, but kept it quiet. Liz is one of the few female regulars, and she has cultivated a conveniently sexless role for herself: part mascot (owing to her height), part den mother, part kid sister. Often, while she waits for her set, she does her homework at the bar.

At 9:30 P.M., a fellow-comic appeared on the street corner to relieve her. "Have a good show," he said, and she headed back to Ha! The barkers pass one another on the sidewalk like factory workers changing shifts.

Liz's performance style is low-key. She walks on, calmly takes the mike out of the stand, moves the stand to the side, and begins, "I'm the baby of the group, the little sister of the comedy club." In a musing tone, she goes on, "Lately, people have been trying to inflict their life lessons on me?" There's a bit of teen "uptalk" in her intonation. "Like, the other day, this guy came up to me and said, 'You know what, Liz, life is one big emotional roller coaster,' and I told him I didn't agree. But then I went home and I was thinking about it, and I was, like, you know, maybe life *is* one big emotional roller coaster and I'm just too short to get on the ride." This usually gets a small laugh. She goes into a series of short jokes ("I feel kinda like a Caucasian Smurf"), and bits about how she wears her trademark bandanna instead of gauze after getting banged in the forehead with book bags and fanny packs. If she isn't hearing laughs, she'll do a fake ad-lib with the audience. "Sir, I feel like I'm hurting you," she'll say to a man. "Are you all right?" Then she'll pretend to invite him out after the show: "Maybe we can get a drink afterwards. You can get a beer, I can get a—milk?" She talks about having had her wallet stolen, and she bemoans the identification requirements of the D.M.V. She says she felt suicidal there, but decided against ending her life like that. "If I did die at the D.M.V., who would know? People would be, like, 'Is that Liz Miele?' 'Naw, she only has five points of identification.' " During her routine, she uses her hands conversationally; otherwise, her movements are cramped. She'll stand sideways to show off her new chain wallet, gesturing toward it with a sweep of her hand. "Who's scared now?" she says. "But sometimes I wonder. Maybe someone will look at me and say, 'She's tough, don't fuck with her,' but then someone else might think, Must kill before taking wallet."

After her set this January evening, she was going to take the train to New Jersey. She had promised to babysit her three siblings the following day so that her parents could have their weekly date. Otherwise, she would have been in her dorm, eating chocolate-chip mini-muffins and watching comedy tapes.



"I did have plants, but they were so needy."

The man who owns Ha!, Anthony DiNapoli, has no particular love for comedy. His career in show business began in 1993, when he teamed up with his brother, an Elvis impersonator; they did karaoke in Yonkers, bought a pizza parlor, and ran a pub. During a trip to Vegas, he says, "I was exposed to the concept of the duelling piano." When he returned to New York, he found an old bakery on West Forty-sixth Street and converted it into a piano bar, which he named Sweet Caroline's, after a favorite Neil Diamond song. Not long afterward, Anthony was approached by a showy gay comic named Exiene Lofgren, who asked if he could book comedy shows during the club's downtime. Business picked up. In October, 2002, the duelling pianos were finally carted away and Sweet Caroline's became Ha!

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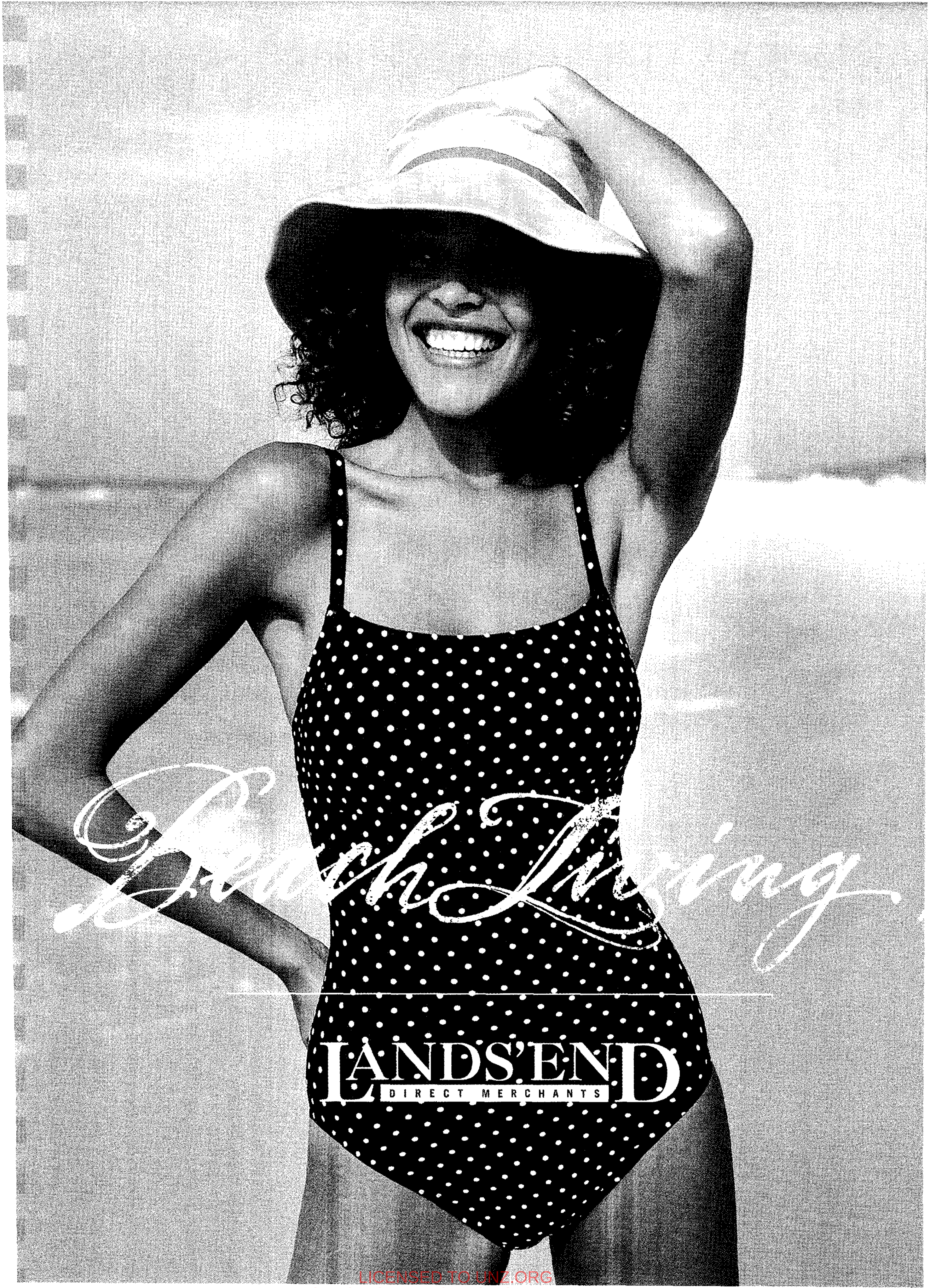
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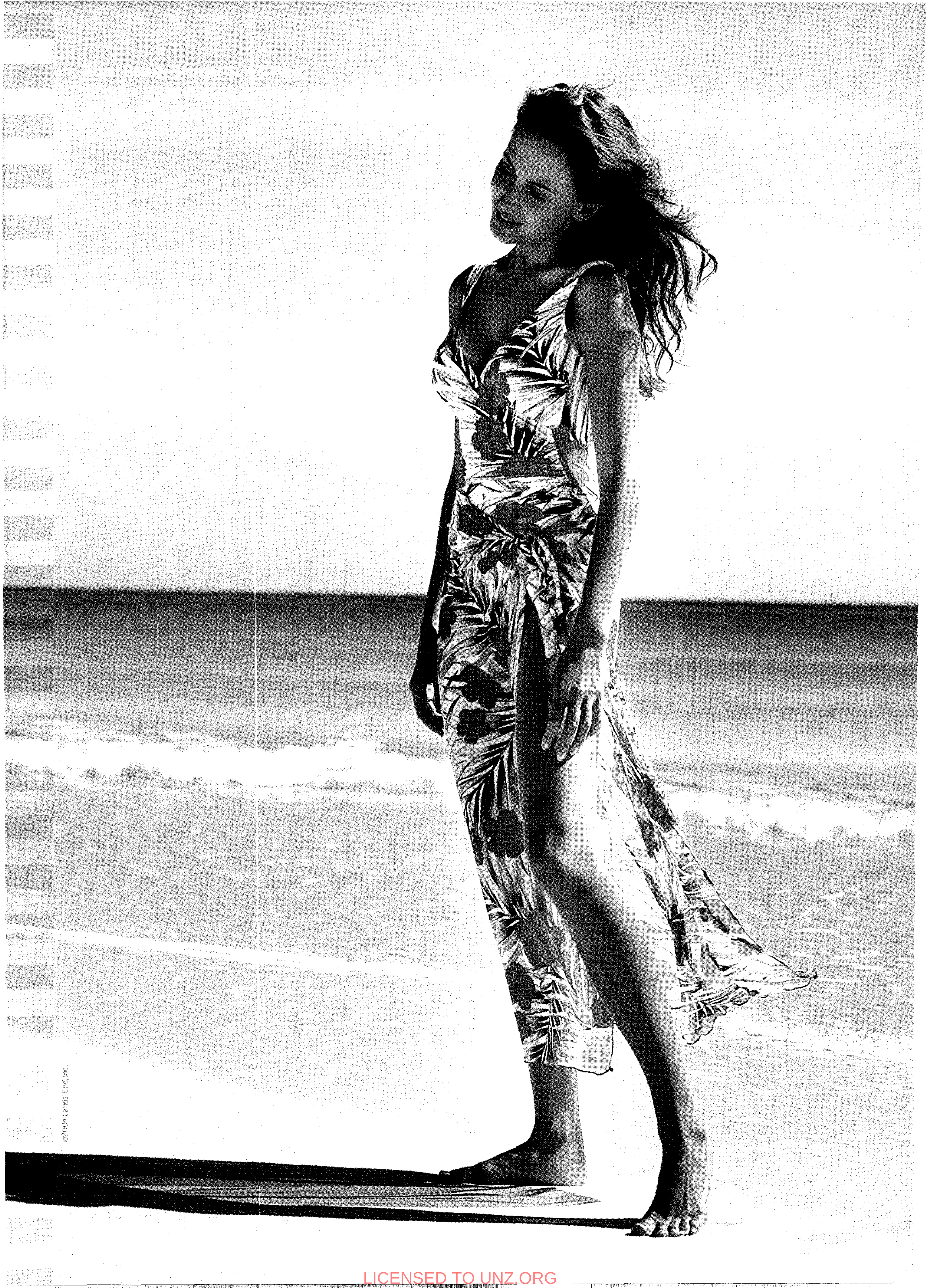

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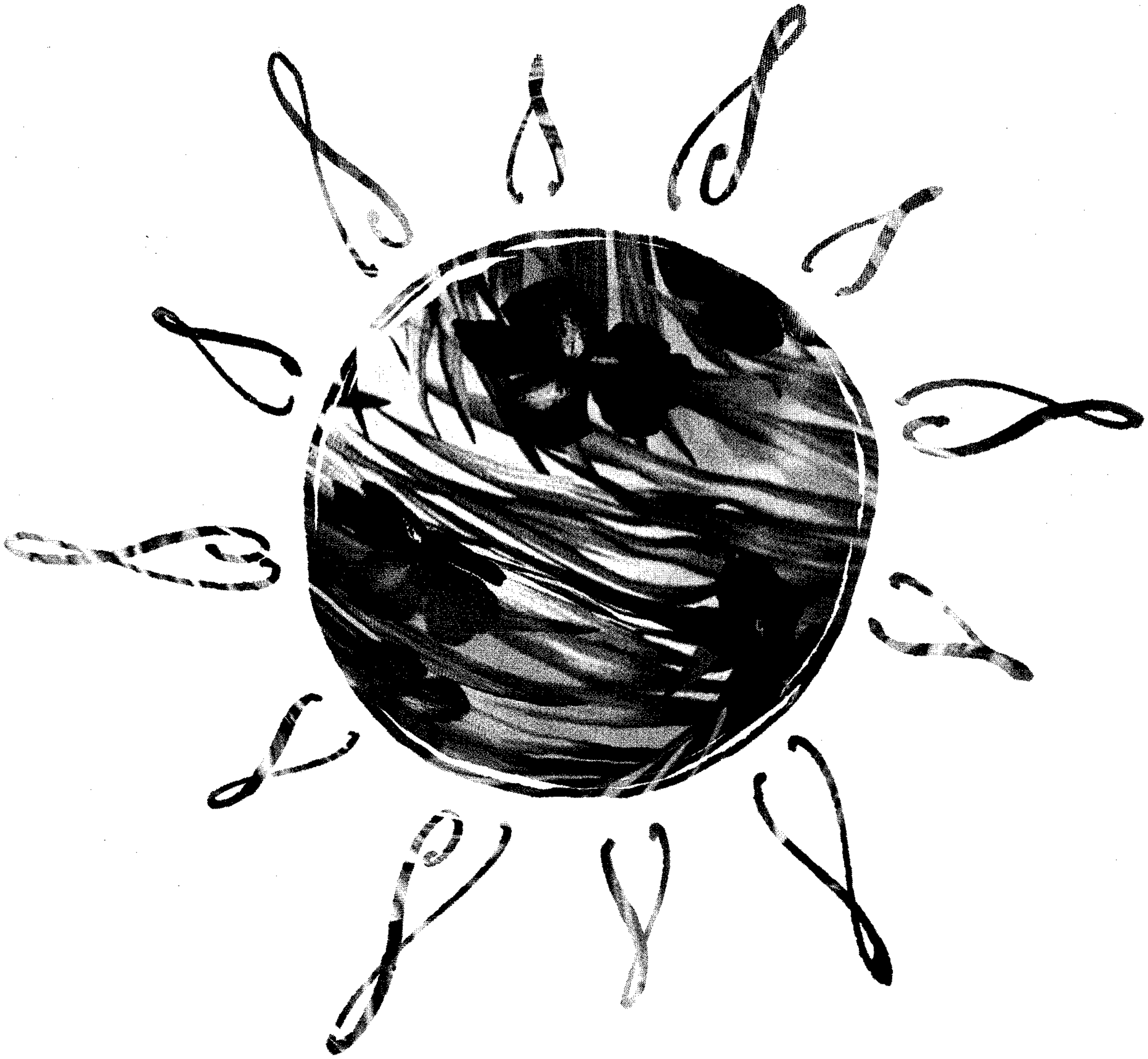

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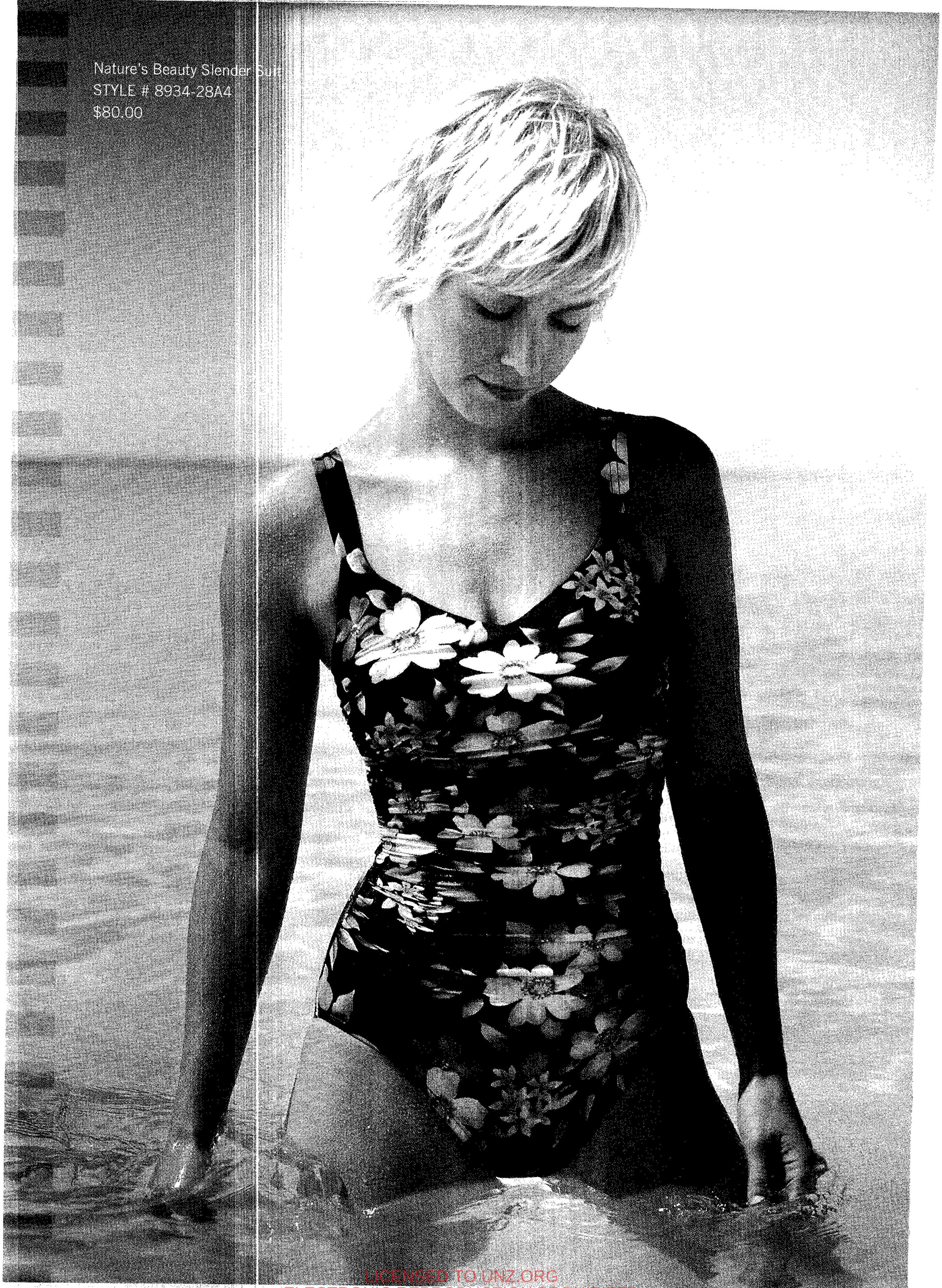

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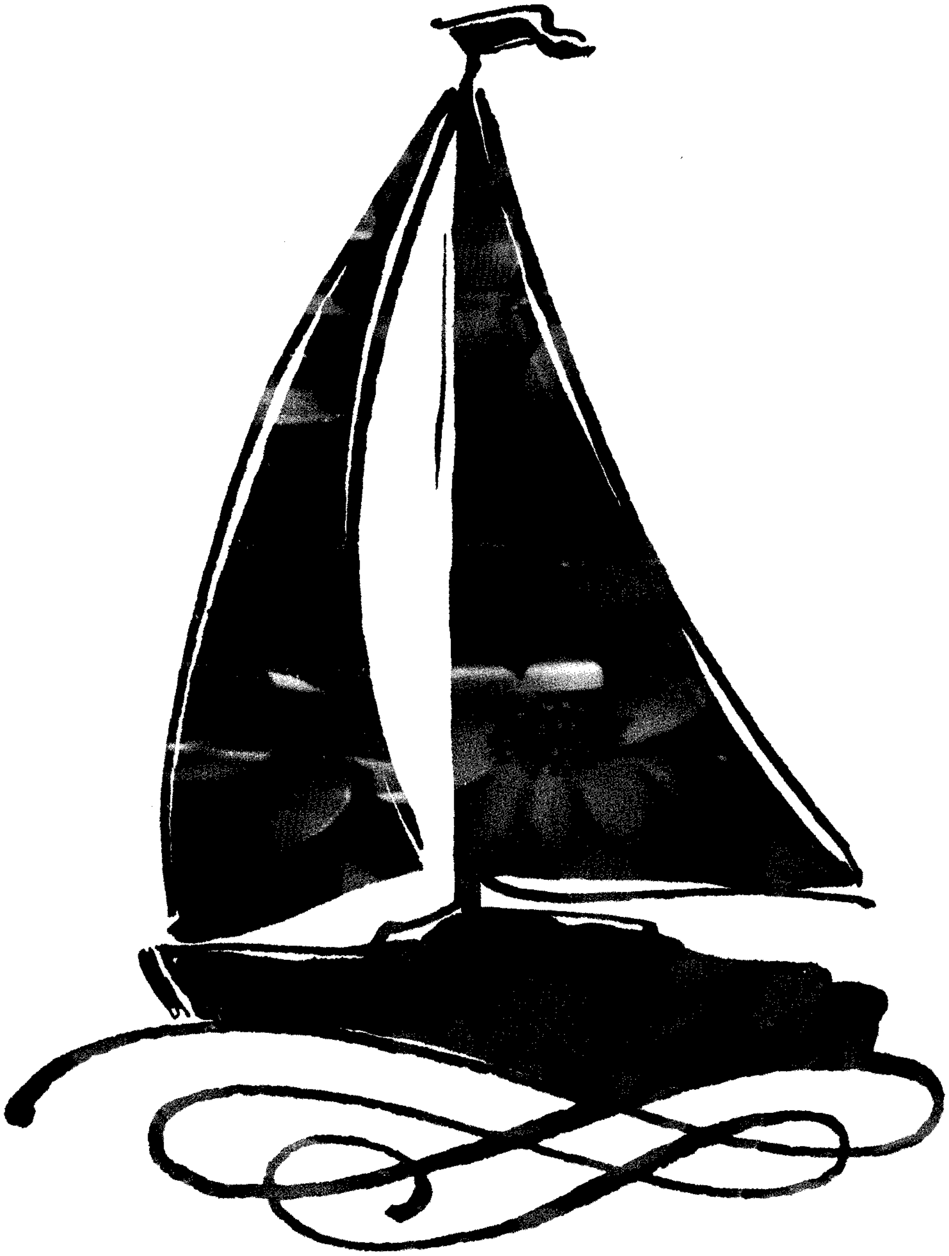

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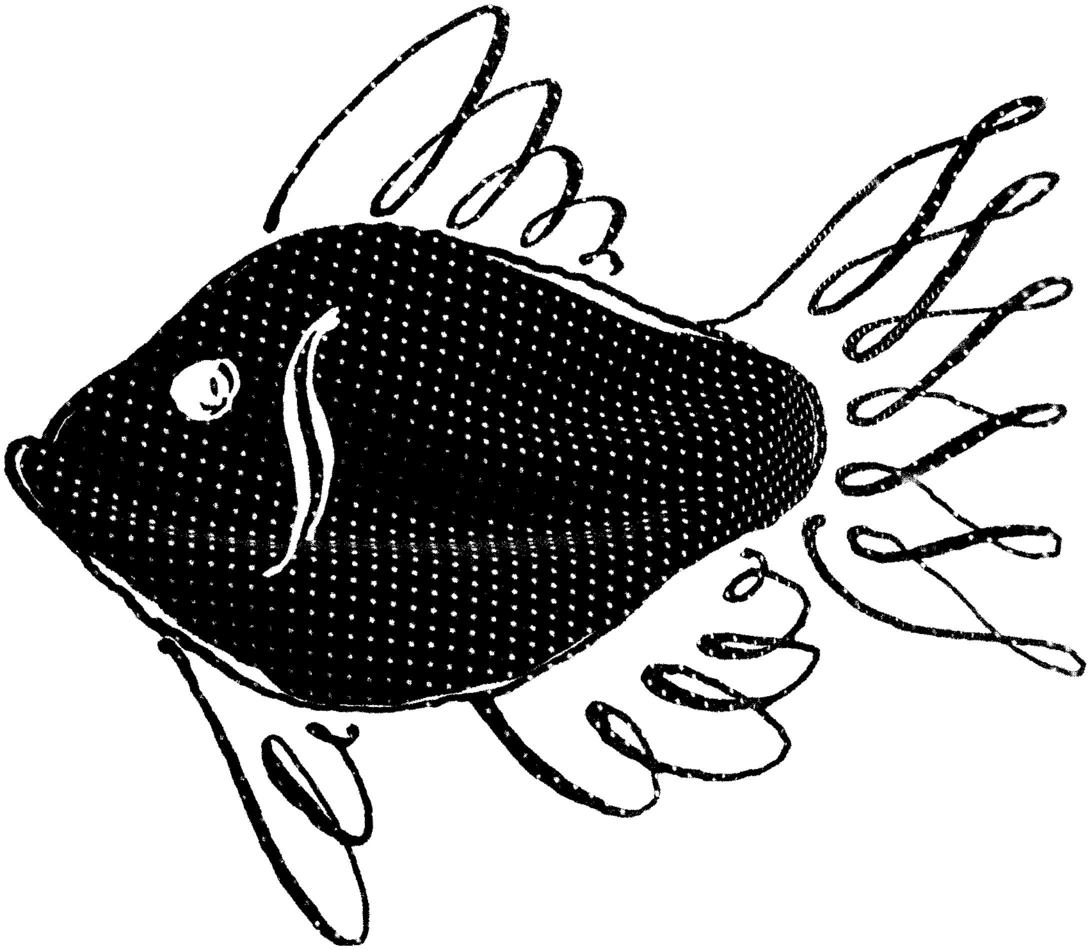

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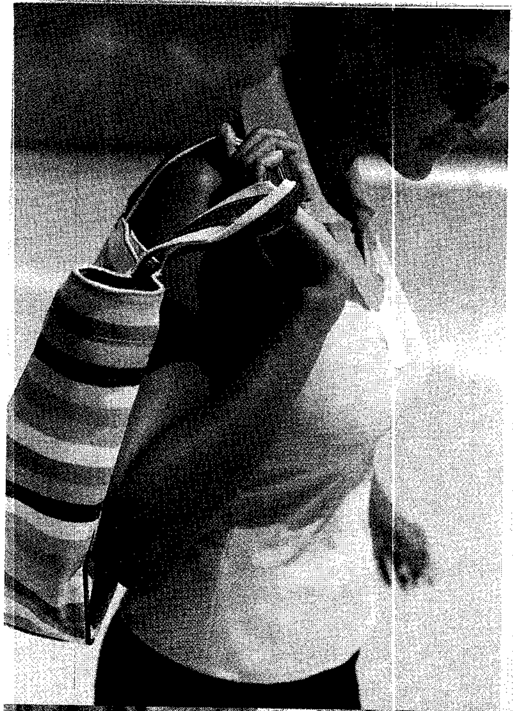

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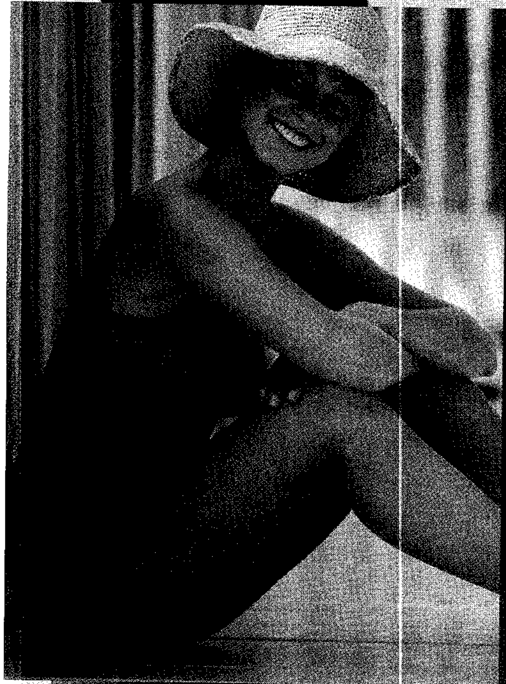

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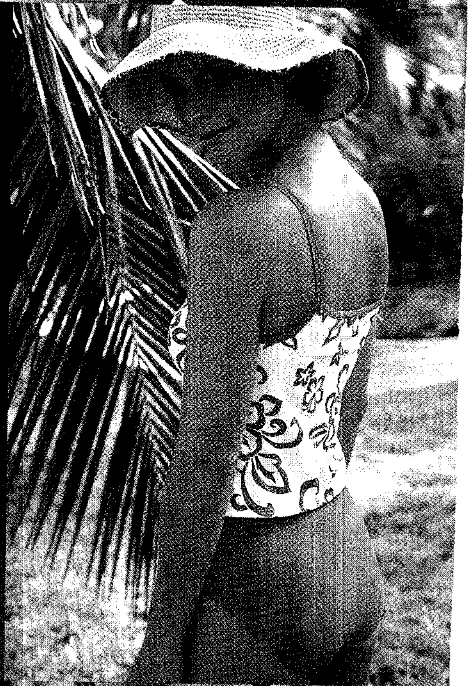
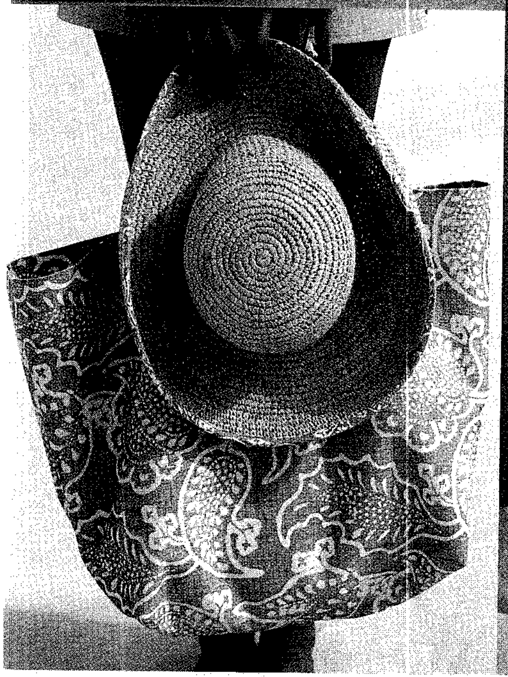
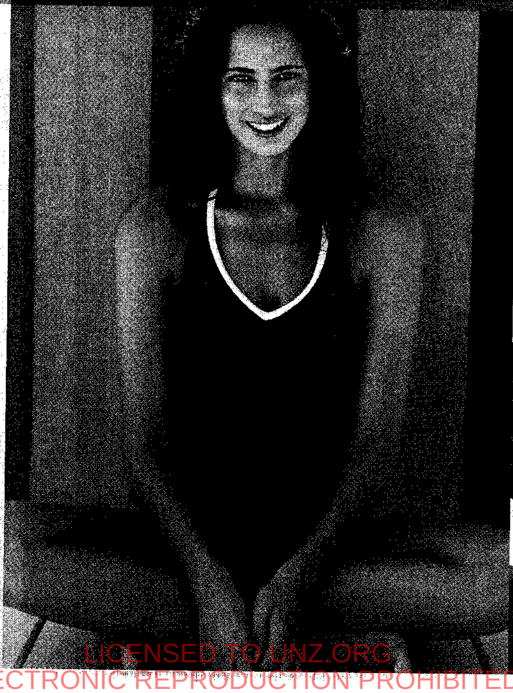




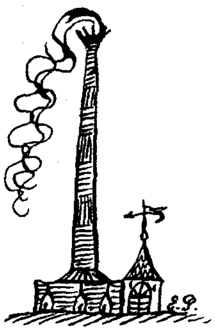


city, it is able to bring in audiences for a minimum of seven shows a night on weeknights, and eight or nine on weekends. (A-list clubs usually do no more than four shows a night at their busiest.) This means that Ha! fills more than two hundred spots a week with novices. Ha! is also relatively cheap: where A-list clubs sell advance tickets with covers of between fifteen and thirty-five dollars, admission to Ha! is seven dollars with the flyer. The barkers don't get paid for their sets, but after the first five customers they earn two dollars a head. Ha! amateurs also do a fair amount of grunt work—mopping, sorting empty bottles in the basement, walking Anthony's dog.

"It's a family atmosphere," Anthony, who comes in every day from Yonkers, says. "Like in every family, someone's in control." He is thirty-five, wears his dark-brown hair in a gelled comb-back, and has a gruff, bullying air. He favors button-down shirts that he leaves untucked, possibly because he's gained some weight in the past year. His authority is demonstrated in unpredictable outbursts of temper, which sometimes take place in public, and an ever-changing list of house rules (comics can drink only after shows; comics can't drink after shows at the upstairs bar; comics can't drink at all; only those comics approved by Anthony can drink; comics can't hang out together at the bar between sets; and so forth). "He's Fred Flintstone, if Fred Flintstone joined the Mafia," one comedian says.

The club's other principals are Francisco, the manager and booker, and Exiene, its "creative director." Both of them have the pallor of people who live in clubs, but their styles are different. Like a disciplinarian older brother, Francisco affects a labored sternness, though the effect is undercut by the fact that his suits are a size too big. Exiene, a pear-shaped man with a flawless, fatless face, has a sort of dishy Broadway shtick, which works well at showtime; on repeated exposure, he can come across as calculating and hard. Exiene m.c.s three or four shows a night and is something of a stage mother, slighting certain comics while showering attention upon his protégés. You hear complaints that when he m.c.s he deliberately undermines performers he doesn't like. Another source of contention is the "check spot"—the moment when the waitresses hand out the checks. Nobody wants to work it, because the audience is distracted by looking over the check and sorting out cash. Francisco is admired for stepping up and "eating the check spot," as m.c.s are supposed to; Exiene has been known to give it to newcomers.

Both of them have larger ambitions for Ha!, though everyone knows it's pretty far down the comedy food chain. "I would love nothing more than for this to be the next Second City," Francisco says wistfully. Exiene says, "We want to do *this* generation, which means a series of trial and errors. We're just starting to find our legs." Exiene sometimes recognizes that his ambitions for the club outstrip its likely prospects. For both clubs and performers, comedy is such an arduous business that even staying in place is an accomplishment. "We work hard to respect them," Exiene says of the barkers, "but sometimes we're, like, 'Grow up.' We forget that they are not only young comics but young."



Liz's boyfriend, Greg Barris, was a twenty-one-year-old Greek-American comic with a head of curly brown hair and a vague resemblance to the actor Mark Ruffalo. Greg moved to New York from Orlando, Florida, a few months ago to do comedy, and has grown increasingly self-critical about the gap between his onstage persona and his real-world passivity: "I'll be on the bus and I don't push the button because I don't want the bus to stop just for me, and I end up fifteen blocks from where I'm supposed to be," he says. "Yet I'll get up onstage and talk about my problems getting an erection. Why?" He obsesses about such things on the long train rides to and from Bensonhurst, where he lives with his grandmother and an uncle. He has no paying job and few friends in New York, and his grandmother complains because he's often out until dawn and then sleeps in. He recently overheard her talking to his mother, saying, "We eat dinner with him every night, and he's just not funny."

One January night, when Greg was waiting by the bar for his set, he bemoaned his knack for getting into "special situations," like falling asleep on the subway home, and having to do the real scut work at Ha!—chores that Liz deftly manages to avoid entirely.

Greg swears that he's not going to unclog the toilet the next time he's ordered to, but then Francisco will catch him at the bar—"Barris! Toilet's clogged"—and, moments later, Greg and the plunger are headed upstairs. Or he'll be informed that there are empty bottles in the basement that need to be separated and counted. "And then I go downstairs and scream," Greg said. "In my mind."

Greg's stage act plays out this conflict. He begins one of his bits in a quiet, contemplative voice: "I'm very passive-aggressive. My ex-girlfriend used to take the sheets from me at night. And I would be sheetless, and cold, and instead of telling her the next day, 'Hey, honey, you're so beautiful. Sometimes you take the sheets at night? And I was wondering if you could stop?,' instead of doing that, I wait till we're asleep and she starts to take the sheets"—his voice turns angry—"and then I fucking grab the sheets, and I spin and I spin, and I'm staring at her, and I'm thinking"—now he's speaking in a guttural, enraged whisper—"You stupid fucking bitch! Who's got the fucking sheets now?"

Unlike many of his peers, Greg writes constantly. "He does a new joke every friggin' day," Liz says. "I've done three new jokes in the last two weeks." Greg seems more interested in the philosophy of standup than in getting a laugh. He's proud of the stealing-back-the-sheets joke because "there's no funny at the front," he says. "It's so great. I love it. The audience loves it. And I can't wait until I hate it. That's when I know I'm progressing." He has similarly complicated feelings about the audience. He loves the participatory nature of standup, but he sometimes resents the stupidity of the audience—the way, as a comic, he labors over intelligent material only to hear the audience roaring over the kind of jokes you'd find on the Internet.

Greg always carries a dog-eared moleskin notebook along on his city wanderings, in which he writes down lists—books he wants to read, movies he wants to see, music and comedians he wants to check out, together with new jokes, his set lists, and bits of dialogue. He spends two or three hours a day commuting between Ha! and Bensonhurst, and he reads vora-

"Father drinks, doesn't he?"

• •

ciously (in the past month: "Lolita," two collections of essays by Lester Bangs, "A Confederacy of Dunces," Krishnamurti, some Chomsky, Terrence McKenna, and two chess strategy books). When he returns home to his grandmother's, at 4 or 5 A.M., he'll spend a few hours writing on his laptop in the living room. When he wakes, at three or four in the afternoon, he'll write a few more pages. "The more I write, the more comfortable I get with the way I think," he says.

These days, Peyton is the only up-and-comer to whom Exiene pays serious attention. "He's my protégé," Exiene says. "Right now, he's no different from any other comic, but he has a charm that transcends that." Exiene says he's impressed with Peyton's work ethic and with his humility; he likes the fact that Peyton doesn't blame the audience for his failures. But he does think that Peyton needs to get knocked around by life a bit. Exiene got knocked around himself. He grew up poor, white, fat, and gay in a rough black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago. He sees the ability to be funny as "God's little reparation for the trauma."

Peyton's training in theatre shows up in his tendency to act out the words of his jokes—swinging an arm to indicate walking, conducting the audience like a maestro when he wants a chorus of pity for a my-girlfriend-just-broke-up-with-me opener. The mugging and the impressions can go awry, but they usually pay off in a sequence he has on P.M.S., in which he shifts between two roles—the hormonally crazed girlfriend and the baffled boyfriend. "Ladies, I gotta ask you a question. Tell me why is it that when a girl's P.M.S.-ing she's only mean to her boyfriend? Me and my ex-girlfriend, we'd have friends over for dinner, and she'd be cool like monkey drool to everybody else there. She'd be walking them to the door, saying, ' 'Bye, Steve, see ya soon. Thank you so much for coming over. Oh, we just had the best time. G'night!' " He mimes closing the door, and transforms himself into a bellowing harridan: " 'Fuck you and let me tell you why!' " His own voice again: "As men, we are completely unprepared and defenseless against the mood swings and the utter it's-my-faultness of P.M.S. I walk into a room and it's, like, forty-five degrees colder than the room I just came out of." Before long, the girlfriend character is jumping off the stage as the P.M.S. monster incarnate, neck jerking like a "Jurassic Park" dinosaur. If the material isn't hitting, he'll break out an aw-shucks grin.

As Exiene's protégé, Peyton has to put up with relentless comments from his fellow-barkers about blow jobs and Vaseline. But he tries not to take it personally: he stays away from the gossip, focusses on his chores, works his sets. "At this level, I'm not a commodity yet, and I don't expect to be," he says. "You can't look too far down the tunnel, but I'm so glad that I'm at least walking that way."

Although Liz no longer has to do bringer shows for stage time, she still does one occasionally in order to network and to try out her sets in front of a more discriminating audience. The established clubs tend to draw people seeking comedy, whereas Ha! catches tourists who have time to kill. Bringers, which require comics to bring in anywhere from three to twenty customers, help clubs fill otherwise empty seats during their slower hours, and get the comic a five-to-nine-minute set, depending on how many guests show up.

On January 21st, Liz performed at the Gotham Comedy Club, in Chelsea, where Jerry Seinfeld has headlined. Liz and Greg hadn't been getting along lately, but he came to show his support. Liz brought in eleven people, including childhood friends, their roommates and their boyfriends, and Greg. The place was packed.

Greg, who arrived in a brown Diesel coat, slid into a seat near Liz's rowdy tribe—a guy in black leather with a proper Mohawk, a chubby boy with facial piercings, a slender girl named Alison, and Amanda, Liz's best friend, who has two-toned hair.

"So you're the boyfriend," Amanda said. Before Greg had a chance to respond, she started flirting with the Mohawk guy, and Alison turned her attention to the menu. Greg sighed, the elderly twenty-one-year-old out on the town with the kids. He sat back and marvelled at the elegance of the Gotham, with its antique-white walls, oak bar, and deep-blue velvet curtain framing the stage. "It's so beautiful it makes me want to cry," Greg said.

When Liz came on, her people cheered. She was wearing a white bandanna and bangle bracelets, and her fingers flashed with rings. She began slowly, with her "I'm the little sister of the comedy club" bit, and moved into the short jokes, but the first big laugh came when she ad-libbed, "I'm fucking hilarious. I don't know what's everybody's problem!" Then, with more animation, she moved on to her stolen-wallet joke, the D.M.V. sequence, and so on. Her more sarcastic material went over well, including a bit about her mother: "We are talking about

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a woman who once ran down the dog in the driveway to prove the point that's not where it goes."

When the show was over, a check for a hundred and seventy-eight dollars arrived. Amanda handed it to Greg. "You are the coolest guy I ever met," she told him, smiling brightly. "Can you do the math?" She and her boyfriend immediately left to smoke a cigarette. Stranded, Greg appealed to the other punker. He contributed what he could, but Greg was stuck with an extra seventy dollars of the tab.

Outside, it was snowing. Greg flagged down a cab, because he was running late for the bark. By eleven o'clock, he was back in Times Square, in front of the Toys R Us and its giant Ferris wheel. Charged up by the snow and the blinking neon signs, Greg skated along the sidewalk and slid to a happy stop. He pulled a bunch of Ha! flyers from his pocket and targeted two girls. "You ready for the magic?" he began. "You used to be a party animal," he said to a middle-aged guy, who ignored him. "What happened to the legend?" Two women approached. "Ladies, standup comedy. It's free for the ladies. I'm there. I'm very handsome. Ladies?" They kept on walking.

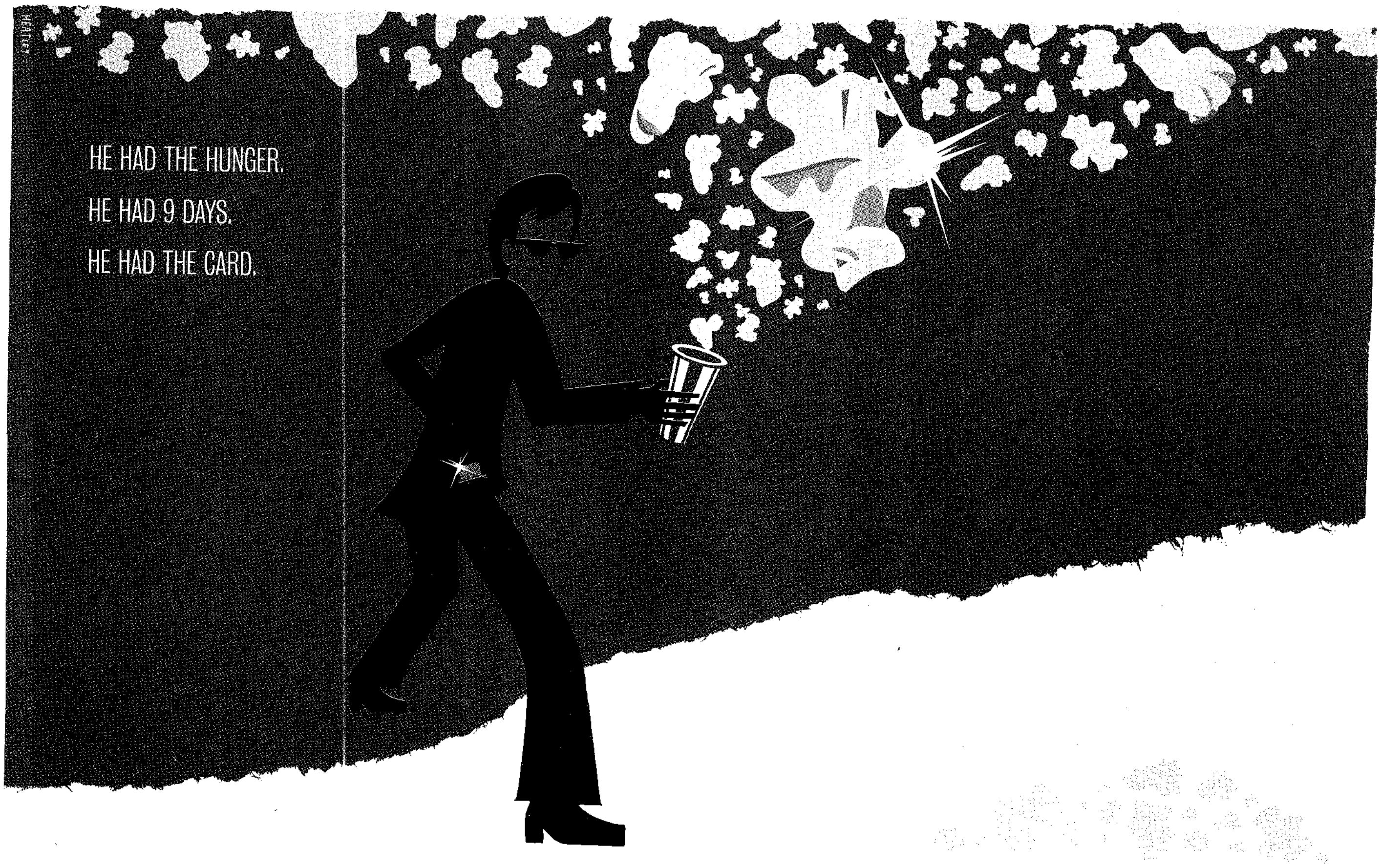
On the evening of February 11th, Peyton was feeling that his star was ascendant: he'd had some strong sets that week, and he'd hooked up with a pretty Polish girl the night before. Best of all, he'd been chosen by Anthony and Francisco to go to Ha!'s sister club, in Virginia Beach, to perform in the Valentine's Day weekend shows. Exiene would be the headliner. Peyton had friends in Virginia Beach, and it was an added perk that, after weeks of barking in freezing temperatures, he would be heading south.

Virginia Beach Ha! advertises "comics straight from N.Y.C.," and Peyton took the words literally. He stopped only once on the seven-hour trip—at a WaWa, for food, cigarettes, coffee, and gas. Exiene rode shotgun, coaching Peyton and philosophizing about the industry. At eight in the morning, they arrived at Anthony's "comedy condo," which had been decorated by comics before them: an Arthur Sarnoff print of dogs playing pool ("The Hustler"), a "Belly Button Lint" jar, a plaque that read, "Home, Sweet Home," and a note on the refrigerator that said, "I shot loads on everything."

On Valentine's Day, Peyton arrived at the club fifteen minutes before the first show. He dropped his canvas knapsack and sat down on a stool next to a side bar lined with grubby binders of listings for karaoke songs. He felt glum and hung over from too much whiskey the night before.

An effort had been made to gussy up the place, but it helped a lot that the lights were low. Twenty couples paid forty dollars each for dinner and the comedy show. Red crêpe-paper twisters hung from paired balloons. Heart-shaped glitter dusted the tables, where plastic heart-shaped trays were filled with Hershey kisses and red foil hearts.

At showtime, Exiene ushered Peyton up the back stairs. The stairwell was cold, littered with last season's cigarette butts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HE HAD 9 DAYS.
HE HAD THE CARD.

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and empty beer cartons. "We don't want the crowd to see us," Exiene explained. They waited in a hallway as Nick Lamanna, a local boy, started things off with a five-minute spot, running through a series of jokes like "They say 'Strive. Strive to be No. 1.' But if you're a pencil you strive to be No. 2." Most of the jokes were greeted by silence. He did get a laugh, though, with "My mom used to walk upside down to entertain us as children. We used to call her Wow." Nick, an Andy Kaufman fan, likes to end his sets with a surprising line. The previous night's had been "Drink Deer Park, established in 1873"; tonight he said, "Eat salmon," and stepped off the stage, seeming pleased.

Exiene got the crowd back with a barrage of gay jokes ("I am a fag, but I could relapse for *you*, sister. Dump him, hang out with me. In the morning, I'll do your hair"). Then he introduced Peyton, who held his own. He had refined his family Cosmo joke to a bit about his Aunt Steven; he got breathless doing his dinosaur-style imitation of his P.M.S.-crazed girlfriend, but the end of it hit: his discovery of her "gnawing on the carcass of a small deer." At this point, he turned his back to the audience and squatted, bobbing his head maniacally and making animal sounds into the mike.

When Exiene took the stage, he couldn't seem to find his footing. He overdid the crowd work, and Peyton went downstairs, not wanting to witness the uncomfortable end. Eventually, Exiene joined him, clearly rattled. "I did too much New York stuff," he said. A soldier shook Peyton's hand and, nodding toward his date, said, "You really hit it on the head with the P.M.S.!" Peyton smiled. He never gets feedback from the audience in New York, because as soon as he completes his set he's back out on the bark, and it's a new crowd when he comes back in.

Ten minutes before the final show of the weekend, Exiene sidled up to Peyton and said, "I have a gift for you." Exiene said that he wanted to feel like a proper headliner, and so he needed Peyton to m.c.—which meant introducing the show, doing fifteen minutes before and after Nick's five, and closing up. That was longer than he had ever been onstage before. To m.c., you have to scatter your jokes between bits of crowd work, not following the order of an established set. Peyton, who works from memory, was terrified. There were now sixty-five people in the audience.

"I'm scared I'll ruin the show," Peyton said, in a panic. "What do I do?"

"Go up, bring up Nick," Exiene said. "Do more, and bring up the headliner." While Peyton ran downstairs to the bathroom, Exiene confided, "I think he's so charming it's impossible to hate him—so it's a good risk."

Downstairs, Peyton held his gut. "I know I have to do this," he said, his voice close to a whisper. He had started to perspire. Exiene coached him in the fetid hallway outside the kitchen, near empty kegs and a huge plastic bucket of bottle caps. Peyton wrote Nick Lamanna's name on his palm so he wouldn't forget it. He looked ill.

But Peyton got through the introduc-

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tion and even came up with a few new jokes. The P.M.S. sequence did well; he managed his breathing better through the dinosaur business; in between his bits he talked to the well-lubricated crowd, making sure to acknowledge the people way in the back of the room, by the bar—something Exiene had forgotten to do. Then he introduced Nick, and even Nick got laughs. Peyton kept up the pace. He was improvising on his feet, and when he pointed out that he was perspiring—more laughs. He did a bit about his girlfriend breaking up with him. When Peyton came off the stage again, the look on his face was one of shock.

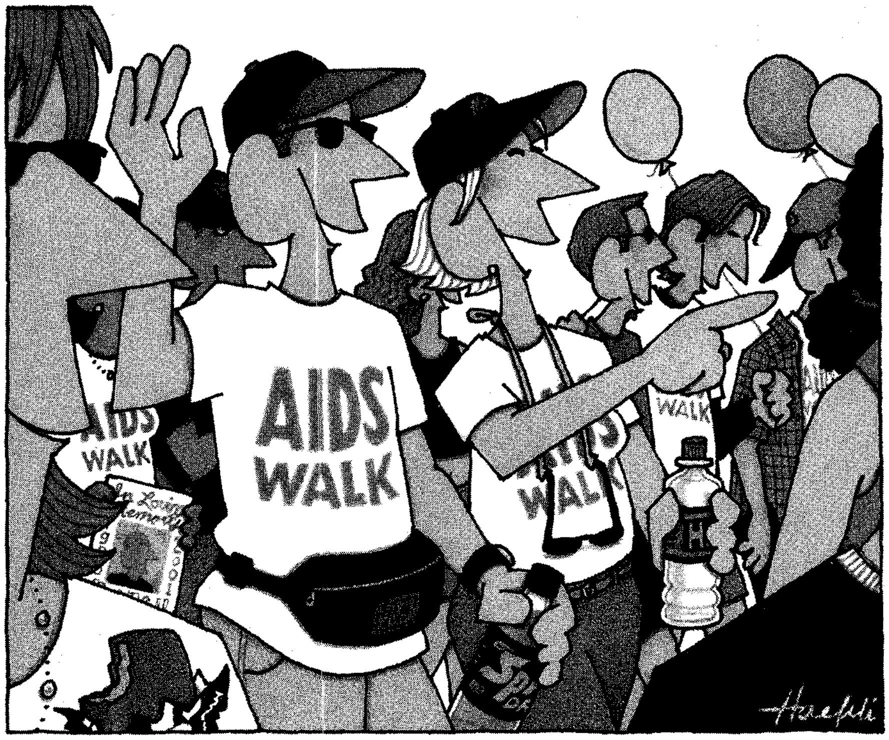
Exiene did the best set he'd done all weekend, and then Peyton closed the show. By the time it was over, he was on his third beer and his clothes were wet with sweat. "Onstage or off, that was the most fun I ever had in my entire life," he said. He'd finally lost his self-consciousness, he explained. He wasn't thinking about the order of the set, or worrying about what was coming next. He was just flowing.

As Peyton mingled with his college friends downstairs, Exiene congratulated him. He did have one pointer, though, which he couldn't resist delivering in front of everyone. That part when Peyton bent down to gnaw on the carcass? It would have worked better if he'd done it standing up, so the people in the back of the room could see.

In the second week of February, Greg was growing frustrated in his attempts to communicate with Liz. "There's a wall there," he said. "I can't pass it. She's totally shut down." He was also feeling in a rut as a performer, and thought that appearing in other venues might help. One of the first things Greg had done when he moved to New York was to circle all the comedy clubs on his Streetwise Manhattan map. One snowy afternoon, he decided to make the rounds. He planned to go to New York Comedy Club, Dangerfield's, the Boston Comedy Club, the Gotham, and the Laugh Lounge. Liz told him that the list was "a little ambitious." Greg himself was filled with dread. "Everyone knows everyone," he said. "You're the new guy. The judgment starts."

After being turned away at the first four places he tried, he lucked out at the Village Lantern. The booker there, a former boxer named Dustin Chafin, agreed to give Greg a spot if he hustled customers in. In fact, he could fit Greg in during this very show. "I can put you on fourth," Dustin said. "No cover." Greg's face lit up. As he headed downstairs to check out the room, Dustin called after him, "Maybe you could buy a beer."

For the next few weeks, Greg gave up Ha! to perform at the Lantern. But he got only a few spots a week, and, without regular stage time, he grew cranky. "I feel like it's kind of a chemical thing," he said. He was sure that the dust at his grandmother's was bothering his sinuses and giving his voice a nasal sound. Throughout the slump, he kept writing. Liz found his material angry. Greg defended it as "honest," but he also said, "I'm not proud of it at all. I have a Puerto Rican-girl joke I wouldn't be able to do anywhere but a seedy comedy club in New York." He was convinced that every show could be his last, and he wound up getting blacklisted from the Village Lantern for going over his allotted time. Then, shortly after Valentine's Day, he and Liz split up. He spent nights trying to muster the courage to introduce himself to bookers at other clubs in the city, and brooding about what he considers his "tragic flaw": "I think everybody hates me. I feel that I can honestly see how everyone is lying to each other in every situation, and so I'm afraid that I'm the guy about who they say, when I walk away, 'I hate Greg Barris.' 'Yeah, I do, too.' 'I *hate* that guy.' '*Everybody* hates Greg Barris.' 'I fucking hate that guy!' " He paused. "I'm that guy."



"Look! It's the Montgomerys from the breast-cancer walk and the Steins from the Alzheimer's walk."

Following Peyton's success in Virginia Beach, Anthony DiNapoli offered him a job doing chores at Ha! Now he mops, moves Pac Man machines, and day-barks—sometimes for upward of five hours—in addition to the two or three shows he hustles in most nights. His sets haven't been going well: he's become bored with his material. He feels that he relies too heavily on his physicality. He also knows that he is picking up the bad habits that he's observed in other comics: hounding girls, especially the Ha! waitresses; drinking too much; not writing enough.

On a Wednesday night in March, Anthony dispatched Peyton to bark along Forty-second Street for the eleven-thirty show. It's not Peyton's preferred place to bark, but he did as he was told. The weather had warmed to thirty-four degrees. Two young white boys wearing matching fake-tuxedo T-shirts didn't want comedy but enthusiastically recommended the dance show they'd just seen. Peyton paused in front of the B. B. King Blues Club and handed out flyers to the remain-

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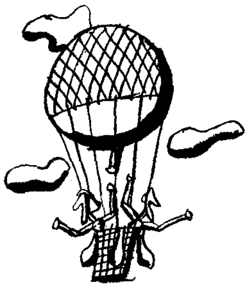
der of a hip-hop crowd, which was also getting barked by a peace activist. "Comedy show?" Peyton said to two thirtyish guys. "So funny it'll make you slap your mama!"

At the corner of Eighth Avenue, Peyton found himself surrounded by a group of black kids who had clearly been drinking. At first, they were just grabbing at his flyers, but then one of them armed Peyton by the neck and turned him around and around, like a drunken sailor. Peyton rolled with it, more aggressively as the menace built—pumping his fist in the air, shouting "Yeah!" and "Ha!," echoing the mocking cries of the kids. Suddenly, the revellers moved on, and the sidewalk seemed strangely quiet. A couple watched Peyton, as if waiting for a signal that he was all right. He shrugged his shoulders self-pityingly, and said, in a high voice, "I feel so violated." Then he crossed the street to do another lap. "That's why I hate Forty-second Street," he said grimly.



Meanwhile, at Ha!, the seats for the eleven-thirty show upstairs were filling with tourists from Tampa and nurses from Poughkeepsie and dental students from Kuwait. At the bar, Greg Barris reviewed his set list. He was happy to be back at Ha! The hiatus had done him some good, he thought. "I feel like I have some steady ground finally to stand on," he said. He'd taken to the material he originally thought of as "foul." Liz told him that the jokes were funny—for dick jokes—but she felt that he was going through a lowbrow period. "I feel he is sacrificing who he is just to get a laugh," she said.

Liz herself had been aiming for "edgier" material, altering the sweet girl-next-door character she'd created. She'd stopped doing her short jokes. "I like my short jokes, but it paints a different picture of me," she said. She found that audiences didn't always relish the shift in her persona when she did her darker bits, like one about a friend who's devoted to his one-eyed cat. ("My friend says, 'The thing I love about this cat is that he's so unusual.' And I said, 'One-eyed cats are easy to come by. All you need is a stray, a bottle of Jack Daniel's, and a spoon.' ") She said, "Either people are glad for the surprise or they are, like, 'Where did the innocent girl go?' " She was thrilled that the lawyer-manager she'd been calling with invitations for more than a year had finally seen her act, and was encouraging. She also received a moving e-mail from her sidewalk friend John, who had finally quit working for Flashdancers.

Tonight at Ha!, everyone was getting laughs. It was the second sold-out show; the crowd, of sixty-some, was in a good mood; the drinks were moving, and there was a redhead with an infectious laugh who was boosting the volume even further. Greg had an excellent set, and his newer material went over especially well. "I'm a very tolerant person," he said. "I put up with a lot of people's bullshit because I don't want to upset or offend anybody. Like, my ex-girlfriend would be sitting on my lap and she would be crushing my legs but I wouldn't want to tell her that, because I wouldn't want her to think she was crushing my legs. Even though"—his voice dropped to a whisper—"she was fucking crushing my legs." In a normal voice again: "Or I'll be getting a hand job from a girl and she's just squeezing too hard and then she's hitting it"—he hit the mike to illustrate—"and I'm thinking to myself, Why is she *hitting* it? But it's not like I can tell her that. What am I going to say? 'Excuse me, miss, you're horrible at this'? No, I can't say that. So I just grin and bear it. And twenty minutes go by and she's, like, 'What's wrong?' Then I just blame myself: 'Uh, sometimes this just happens.' And then, two days later, I'm black and blue and pissing blood, for what? Because I don't want to upset some girl? Some girl I paid seventy-five dollars to give me a hand job?" He finished with a look of consternation, and got a big laugh.

When Greg came off the stage, he seemed oblivious of the success of his set. "It's sort of weird when there are that many people in there," he reported, sitting downstairs. He said that he couldn't figure out where to turn, because no matter which way he looked he was aware that someone was staring at his back.

Greg headed out of the club to have a beer, and Peyton, looking pale, took his seat. He'd just had a repeat encounter with the drunk kids. The police intervened a few minutes later, when they attacked a barker dressed as SpongeBob. The waitress asked Peyton to go and get some bottled water. When he returned, he laid his head down on his arm for a while. Exiene touched his shoulder and said, "I'm just going to let them do a shot special"—kamikaze shots were the mixed-drink special that night—"and I'll bring you up." This is never a good thing for performers, since delivering the drinks creates a distraction, and Peyton was frustrated. He needed this set to hit.

Shortly after Virginia Beach, Peyton had abandoned his "Consti-peyton" opener. Tonight, he started with "How's everybody doing?" and did some ad-libbing about the kamikaze shots. Then he went into his girlfriend-broke-up-with-me bit, cultivating the audience's sympathy, until, when the "Awwww" reached its crescendo, he brayed loudly, "The fucking whore!" His P.M.S. joke scored, and he drew it out; his dinosaur imitation got applause breaks. He did some crowd work, then placed his hands in his pockets and was greeted with hoots when he said, "I love going down on women. I swear to God!" It was the lead-in to "I'm on that Twatkins diet." A big response from the beery crowd. But, when his next bit, a rally cry against advertising, didn't go over, he went for the easy laugh: "I love eating pussy!"

Afterward, Peyton was a little mortified. He knew he'd aimed low with the pussy call back. Exiene signalled him downstairs for a quick conference and a smoke.

"I could tell with the first ten minutes who was going to do well with this audience," Exiene said under the awning outside.

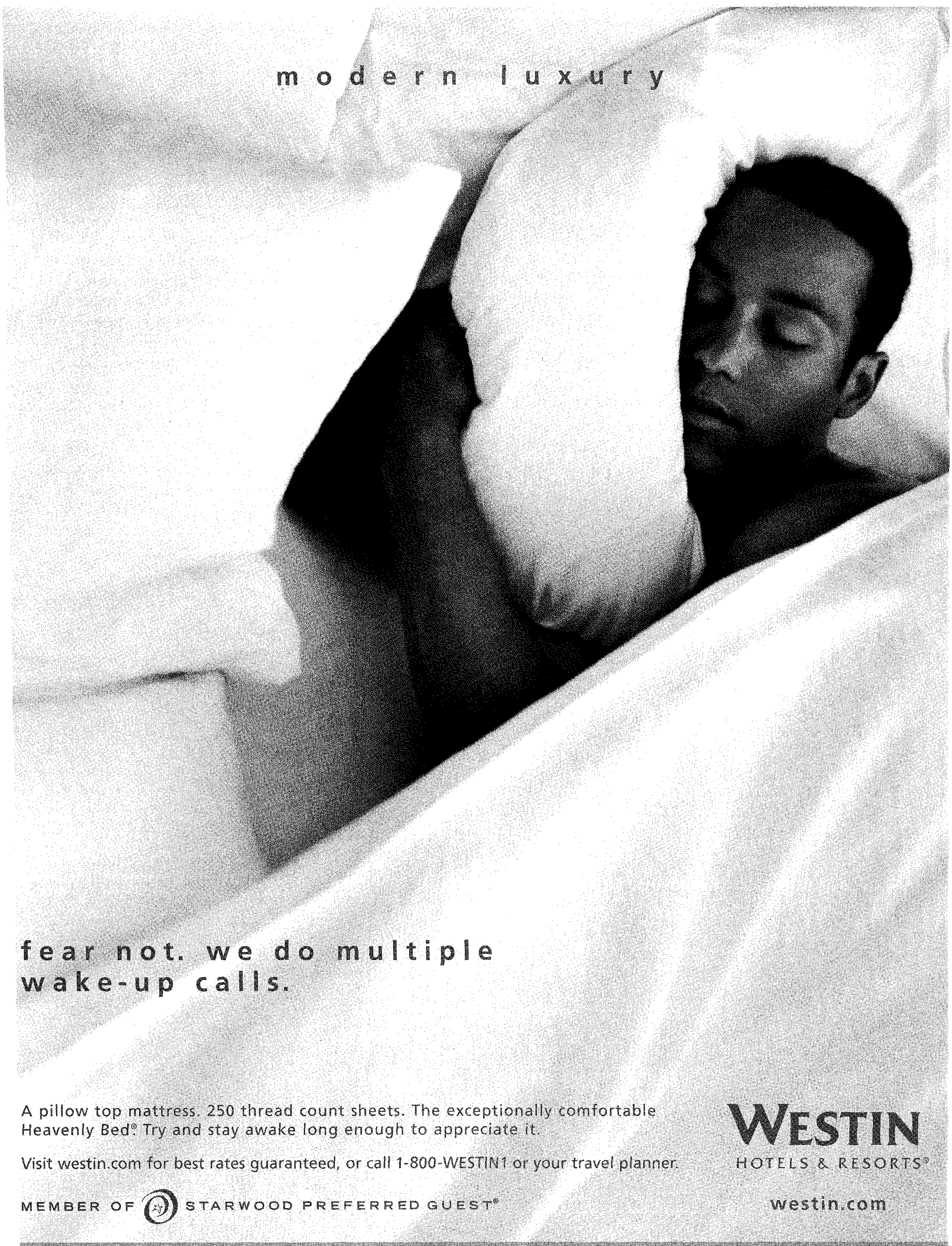
Peyton said nothing.

"Greg Barris has gotten better," Exiene said, trying again.

"He's a good writer," Peyton said, not looking at Exiene.

"He's getting confidence, which is good. It's dark material." Exiene returned upstairs to introduce the next comic.

Now Anthony stepped out, chewing on a piece of pizza. His patterned short-sleeved shirt hung over his belly. He tapped his foot on the ground. "What's this?" he asked Peyton, glaring. The pavement in front of the club was slick with oil, as was the sidewalk. "I don't care about someone killing themselves out there," he said, backhanding the unfinished pizza onto the sidewalk. "I care if they kill themselves here." For the moment, it was decided to cover over the mess. Peyton bent down and pulled the doormat closer to the street. ♦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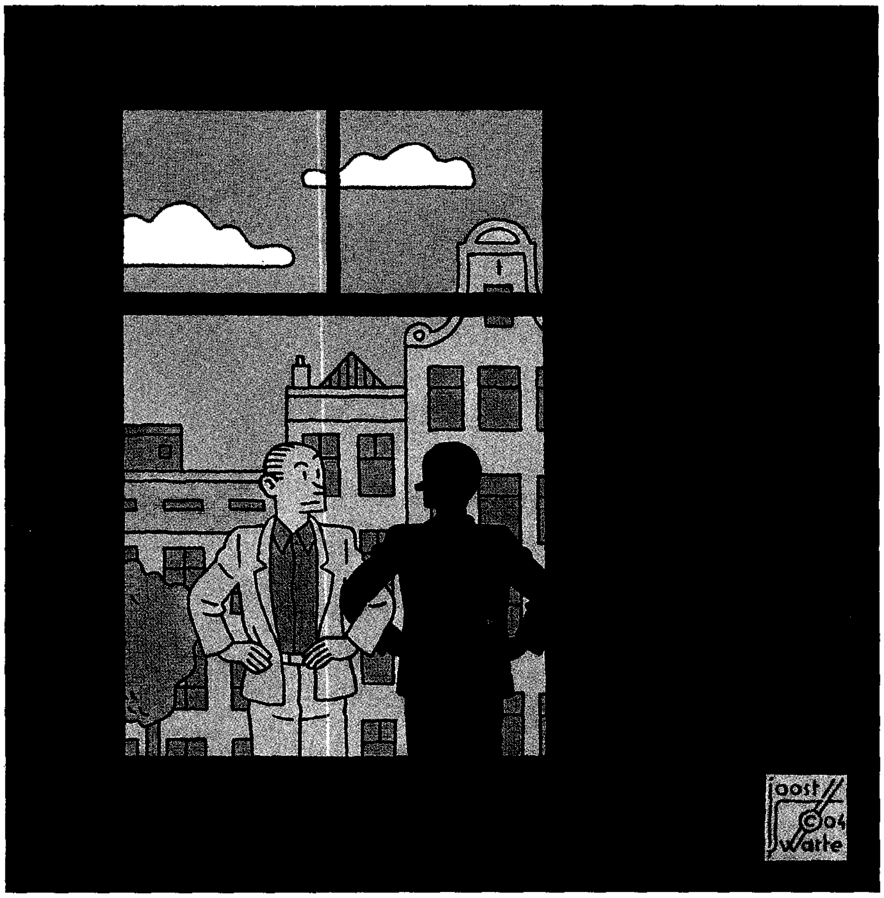
RECOLLECTIONS

POSSESSION

Finding a place to call your own.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

"Finding an apartment is a lot like falling in love," the real-estate agent told us. She was a stylish grandmother in severe designer sunglasses. Dyed blond hair, black stockings, a little scarf tied just so around the throat: for three months, she drove us around Paris in her sports car, Hugh up front and me folded like a lawn chair into the back seat.



Why settle for Paris before first exploring the narrow streets of Amsterdam?

JOOST SWARTE

At the end of every ride, I'd have to teach myself to walk all over again, but that was just a minor physical complaint. My real problem was that I already loved an apartment. The one we had was perfect, and searching for another left me feeling faithless and sneaky, as if I were committing adultery. After a viewing, I'd stand in our living room, looking up at the high, beamed ceiling and trying to explain that the other two-bedroom had meant nothing to me. Hugh took the opposite tack and blamed our apartment for making us cheat. We'd offered, practically begged, to buy it, but the landlord was saving the place for his daughters, two little girls who would eventually grow to evict us. Our lease could be renewed for another fifteen years, but Hugh refused to waste his love on a lost cause. When he was told that our apartment could never truly be ours, he hung up the phone and dialled the real-estate grandmother, which is what happens when you cross him: he takes action and moves on.

The place was officially dead to him, but I kept hoping for a miracle. A riding accident, a playhouse fire: lots of things can happen to little girls.

When looking around, I tried to keep an open mind, but the more places we visited the more discouraged I became. If the apartment wasn't too small, it was too expensive, too modern, too far from the center of town. I'd know immediately that this was not love, but Hugh was on the rebound and saw potential in everything. He likes a wreck, something he can save, and so he became excited when, at the end of the summer, the grandmother got a listing for what translated to "a nicely situated whorehouse." His feeling grew as we made our way up the stairs, and blossomed when the door was unlocked, and the smell of stagnant urine drifted into the hall. The former tenants had moved out, leaving clues to both their size and their temperament. Everything from the waist down was either gouged, splintered, or smeared with a sauce of blood and human hair. I found a tooth on the living-room floor, but, of course, this was just me—Mr. Bad-Mouth. Mr. Negative. While I was searching for the rest of the body, Hugh was racing back and forth between the hole that was a kitchen and the hole that was a bathroom, his eyes glazed and dopey.

We'd shared this expression on first seeing the old apartment, but this time he was on his own, feeling something that I could not. I tried to share his enthusiasm—"Look, faulty wiring!"—but there was a hollowness to it, the sound of someone who was settling for something and trying hard to pretend otherwise. It wasn't a horrible place. The rooms were large and bright, and you certainly couldn't argue with the location. It just didn't knock me out.

"Maybe you're confusing love with pity," I told him, to which he responded, "If that's what you think, I really feel sorry for you."

The grandmother sensed my lack of enthusiasm and wrote it off as a failure of imagination. "Some people

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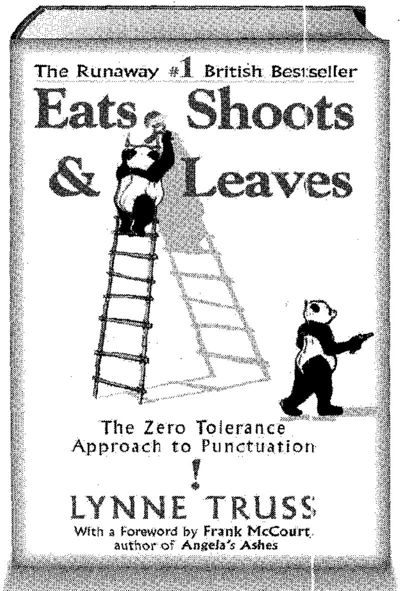
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can see only what's in front of them," she sighed.

"Hey," I said, "I have," and I said the dumbest thing: "I have powers."

She pulled a phone from her handbag. "Prove it," she said. "The owner has gotten three offers, and he's not going to wait forever."

If finding an apartment is like falling in love, buying one is like proposing on your first date and agreeing not to see each other until the wedding. We put in our bid, and when it was accepted I pretended to be as happy as Hugh, and his bridesmaid, the grandmother. We met with the banker, and a lawyer we addressed as Master LaBruce. I hoped that one of them would put an end to this—deny us a mortgage, unearth a codicil—but everything moved according to schedule. Our master presided over the closing, and the following day the contractor arrived. Renovations began, and still I continued to browse the real-estate listings, hoping something better might come along. I worried that we'd chosen not just the wrong apartment but the wrong neighborhood, the wrong city, the wrong country. "Buyer's remorse," the grandmother said, "but don't worry, it's perfectly natural." Natural. A strange word when used by an eighty-year-old with an unlined face and hair the color of an American school bus.

Three months after moving in, we took a trip to Amsterdam, a city often recommended by the phrase "You can get so fucked up there." I imagined Day-Glo bridges, and canals flowing with bong water, but it was actually closer to a Brueghel painting than a Mr. Natural cartoon. We loved the narrow brick buildings, and the wispy sounds of bicycle tires on freshly fallen leaves. Our hotel overlooked the Herengracht, and from the moment we checked in I started to feel that we'd made a terrible mistake. Why settle in Paris before first exploring the possibility of Amsterdam? What had we been thinking?

On our first afternoon, we took a walk and came across the Anne Frank House, which was a surprise. I'd had the impression that she lived in a dump, but it's actually a very beautiful seventeenth-century building, right on the canal. Tree-lined street, close to shopping and public transportation: in terms of location, it was perfect. My months of house hunting had caused me to look at things in a certain way, and on seeing the crowd gathered at the front door I did not think *Ticket Line* but *Open House!*

We entered the annex behind the famous bookcase, and, on crossing the threshold, I felt what the grandmother had likened to being struck by lightning—an absolute certainty that this was the place for me. That it would be mine. The entire building would have been impractical and far too expensive, but the part where Anne Frank and her family had lived, their triplex, was exactly the right size, and adorable, which is something they never tell you. In plays and movies, it always appears drab and old-ladyish, but open the curtains and the first words that come to mind are not "I still believe all people are really good at heart" but "Who do I have to knock off in order to get this apartment?" That's not to say that I wouldn't have made a few changes, but the components were all there and easy to see, as they'd removed the furniture and personal possessions that normally make a room seem just that much smaller.

Hugh stopped to examine the movie-star portraits glued to Anne Frank's bedroom wall—a wall that I personally would have knocked down—and I raced on to the bathroom, and then to the water closet, with its delft toilet bowl looking for all the world like a big soup tureen. Next, it was upstairs to the kitchen, which was eat-in, with two windows. I'd get rid of the countertop and of course redo all the plumbing, but first I'd yank out the wood stove and reclaim the fireplace. "That's your focal point there," I heard the grandmother saying. I thought the room beside the kitchen might be my office, but then I saw the attic, with its enchanting dormer windows, and the room beside the kitchen became a little leisure nook.

Now it was downstairs for another look at the toilet bowl, then back upstairs to reconsider the kitchen countertop, which, on second thought, I decided to keep. Or maybe not. It was

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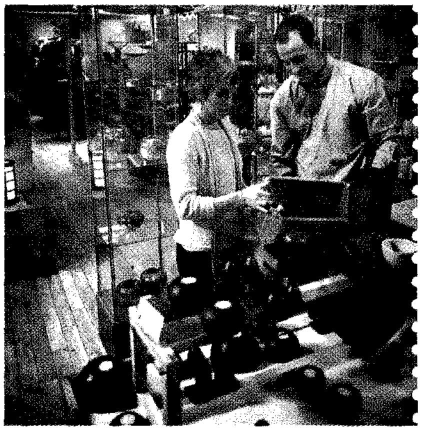

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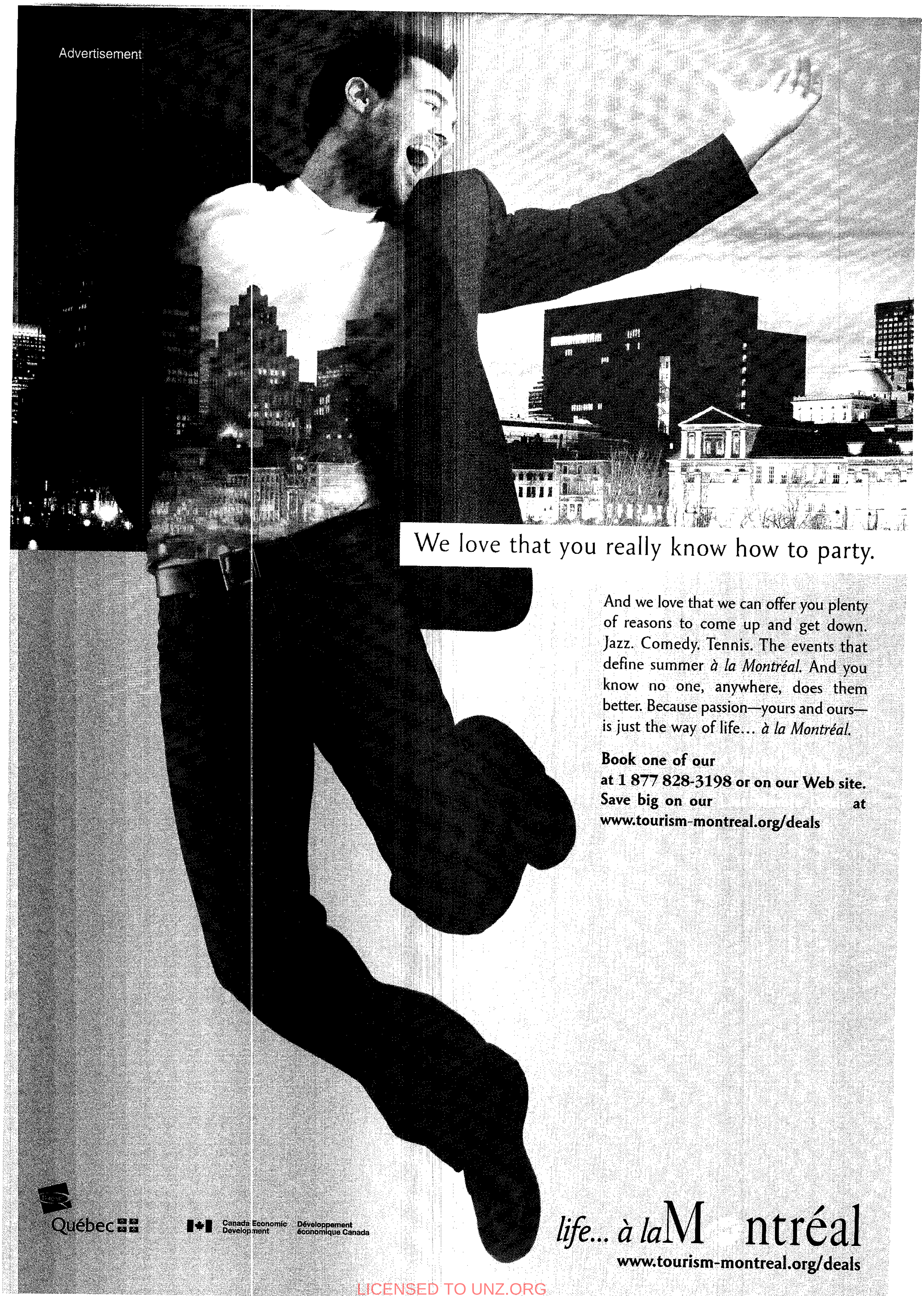

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hard to think with all these people coming and going, hogging the stairwell, running their mouths. A woman in a Disneyland sweatshirt stood in the doorway taking pictures of my sink, and I intentionally bumped her arm so that the prints would come out blurry and undesirable. "Hey!" she said.

"Oh, 'Hey,' yourself." I was in a fever, and the only thing that mattered was this apartment. It wasn't a celebrity or a historical thing, not like owning one of Maria Callas's eyelashes or a pair of barbecue tongs once brandished by Pope Innocent VIII. Sure, I'd *mention* that I was not the first one in the house to ever keep a diary, but it wasn't the reason I'd fallen love with the place. At the risk of sounding too kumbaya, I felt as if I had finally come home. A cruel trick of fate had kept me away, but now I was back to claim what was rightfully mine. It was the greatest feeling in the world: excitement and relief coupled with the giddy anticipation of buying stuff, of making everything just right.

I didn't snap out of it until I accidentally passed into the building next door, which has been annexed as part of the museum. Above a display case, written across the wall in huge, unavoidable letters, was this quote by Primo Levi: "One single Anne Frank moves us more than the countless others who suffered just as she did but whose faces have remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is better that way. If we were capable of taking in all the suffering of all those people, we would not be able to live."

He did not specify that we would not be able to live *in her house*, but it was definitely implied, and it effectively squashed any fantasy of ownership. The thing about Anne Frank is that she almost made it, that she died along with her sister just weeks before their camp was liberated. Having already survived two years in hiding, she and her family might have stayed put and lasted out the war were it not for a neighbor, never identified, who turned them in. I looked out the window, wondering who could have done such a thing, and caught my reflection staring back at me. Then beyond that, across the way, I saw the most beautiful apartment. ♦

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ANNALS OF MARKETING

CARD TRICKS

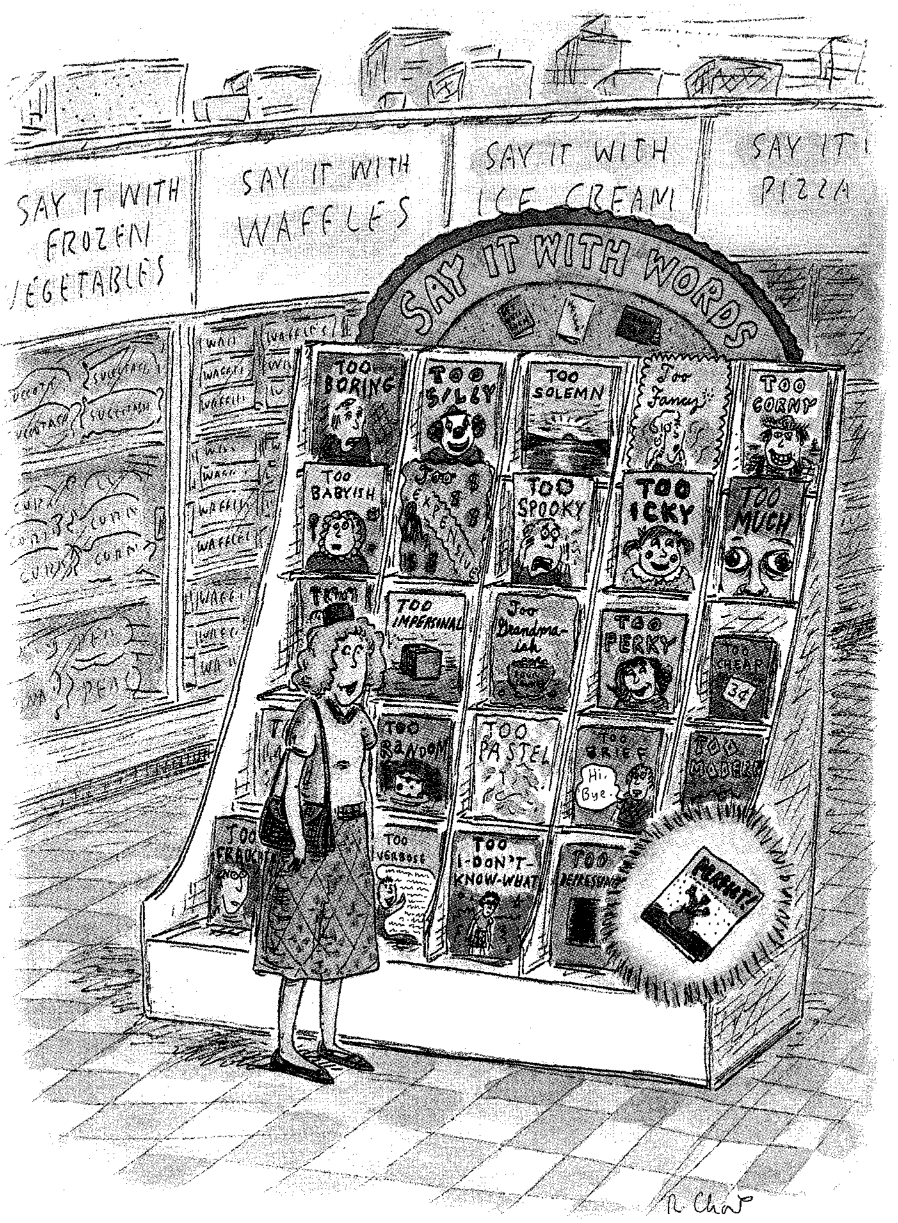
Why laughter isn't enough for Hallmark.

BY DAVID OWEN

Last year, Hallmark Cards began sending members of its writing staff to various cities to talk about what they do for a living. The program, called "Hallmark Writers on Tour," was created in response to inquiries from devoted greeting-card buyers—for whom the encounters nevertheless raise a delicate philosophical issue. A couple of weeks before this year's first trip, Bill Gray, who has been a Hallmark humor writer for sixteen years, told me, "It's kind of a double-edged sword to talk about greeting-card writing, because, in a way, you don't ever want the people who give or receive cards to think about the people who write them. You want the person who receives the card to think only of the person who gave it." The job of a greeting-card writer is to articulate emotions for people who have chosen, in effect, to contract out the work instead of doing it themselves—a process that probably functions best when the authors remain anonymous. Still, the tour has been popular with customers and with Hallmark writers, and when Gray and a few colleagues travelled to Phoenix, a few days before Valentine's Day, I went along.

One of the Phoenix sessions took place in a small dining room at a homey restaurant in a shopping center on the north side of town. After twenty or so guests had squeezed into the room, a member of Hallmark's public-relations staff played an introductory video, in which several writers spoke about their jobs. Then Gray—who has a slight build, wears glasses, and has thinning salt-and-pepper hair and a trim gray beard and mustache—briefly told his life story. He was born in 1952 and grew up in rural Pennsylvania. He adored comic books and *Mad* magazine (the Latin and Greek of the boomer-age American humor worker). On Friday evenings, he and his family would go into town, where he sometimes entertained himself by reading all the greeting cards in the display at the drugstore. He earned a degree in communications at Cornell University. In 1988, while working as the editor of and humor columnist for a small newspaper in western Missouri, he noticed an advertisement in *Editor & Publisher* for a writing job at a relatively new humor-oriented card imprint at Hallmark, called Shoebox. Gray's wife had recently given him a Shoebox anniversary card, whose message had struck him as both funny and incisive. (The card said, "I love you more today than yesterday. Yesterday you really got on my nerves.") He submitted ten card ideas, was hired, and has been at Hallmark ever since. "It always sounds geeky to say this next part," he had told me earlier, "but it just turned out to be this perfect little job for me. I have a certain kind of narrow talent, and this job fits it exactly."

Gray's presentation was followed by that of another humor writer, Chris Brethwaite, who has worked at Hallmark for fifteen years. The two men then answered questions from the group, which consisted mostly of women. After the questions, Michelle Keller, a Hallmark editor and the evening's m.c., asked if any members of the audience would like to share greeting-card stories of their own. A woman raised her hand. She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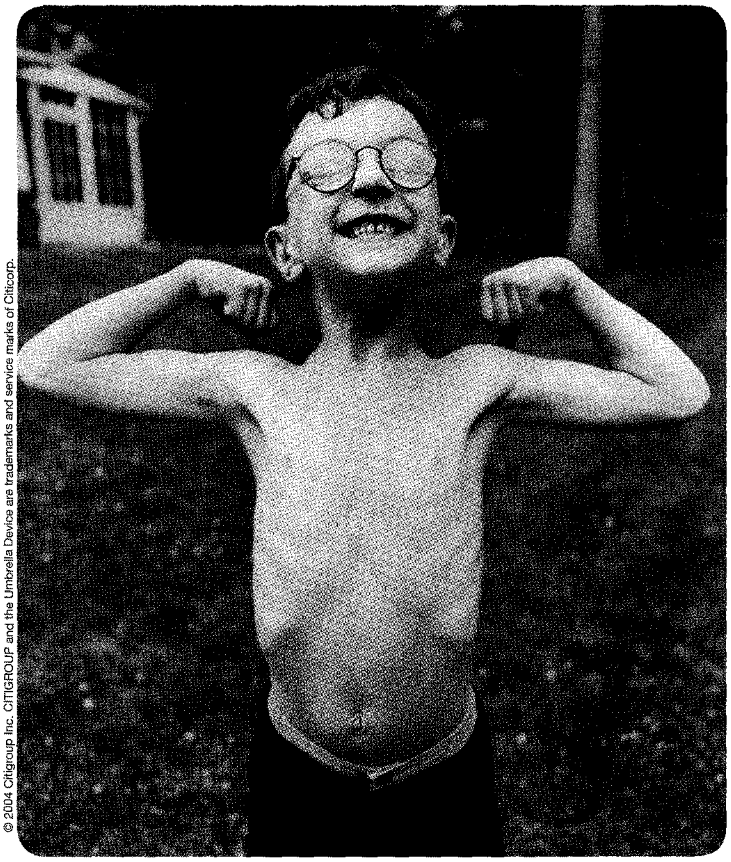

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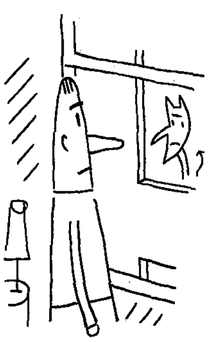
said, "One of the things I noticed when I met my husband—we were dating—is that he would go into a Hallmark store and just take forever to look through all the beautiful cards to find the perfect card for his mother. Or for me. And that was one of the things that attracted me to him. Now we're married and I still have all the cards he ever gave me."

This story impressed the other women in the room, including the Hallmark employees, because one of the great irreducible truths of the greeting-card business is that the vast majority of cards are bought by women, and most men shop for cards carelessly, if at all. "That's wonderful," Keller said. "And for being the first brave soul to share a story we would like to present you with these Hallmark Blushing Bears." She held up a pair of white plush Teddy bears dressed in red outfits—a popular item during this year's Valentine's Day card-buying season. Keller made the bears kiss by pressing their (magnetic) noses together, and a red light inside the female bear's cheeks glowed: a blush. When the other women saw this, they made a sound that is impossible to represent typographically but was approximately "Awwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww!"



More women spoke up. One of them said that at one time she was under a lot of stress at work, and her husband gave her a card that made her laugh, thereby demonstrating that he appreciated the difficulties she was dealing with in her job. The card, she said, depicted a burning building marked "Crisis Center" going over a waterfall.

Gray thought that the card might be the work of the cartoonist Gary Larson, whose well-known series "The Far Side" is featured on greeting cards published by a Hallmark competitor. "It's nice that your husband thought of a card," he told the woman. "Some guys do, you know." Everyone laughed. Keller said, "We like those guys, don't we, ladies?"

The greeting-card business as we know it was invented by Joyce C. Hall—a man, incidentally. He was born in David City, Nebraska, in 1891, and hated his first name, which his mother had selected after being impressed by a Methodist bishop named Isaac W. Joyce. Hall had two older brothers, Rollie and Bill, and a younger sister, Marie. "Neither Rollie nor I had a middle name (Bill's was Finch)," Hall wrote in his autobiography, which was published in 1979, "but Rollie felt we should. He had a teacher named Beatrice whom he particularly favored; so he took Beatrice as his middle name." For Joyce, Rollie chose Clyde.

Joyce Hall had one of those mythical-seeming late-nineteenth-century small-town American childhoods, the kind made extinct by electricity, indoor plumbing, and the telephone. "I slept in an unheated north bedroom with covers piled so high I could barely turn over—and the frost was so thick on the window that when I held a penny to it long enough it would freeze into the glass," he wrote. His father, an itinerant preacher and amateur inventor—he once patented a fly-swatter—went on the road for months at a time, kept his family destitute by spending the bulk of his modest earnings on himself, and disappeared when Joyce was seven. Joyce began working for money when he was eight. Often hungry, he resolved that if he ever got rich, "every day I would have a baked potato with three pieces of butter." During the summer of 1903, he travelled by train and stagecoach through western Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota as a drummer, or salesman, for a candy business that Rollie was involved in. He carried a gun, saw dog meat drying on lines at an Indian reservation, and happily consorted with a multitude of disreputable characters. He was twelve.

Between the turn of the twentieth century and the First World War, picture postcards, many of them imported from Europe, became extraordinarily popular in the United States. Joyce thought that cards seemed like a promising enterprise, so, when he was eighteen, he filled two shoeboxes with cards, took a train to Kansas City, and set up an innovative mail-order business, which he operated out of a room at a Y.M.C.A. The sales territory he had in mind was too large to be covered by even an epically ambitious teen-ager, so he assembled packages containing a hundred postcards, plus an invoice for a dollar and eight cents, and addressed each one to "The Leading Post

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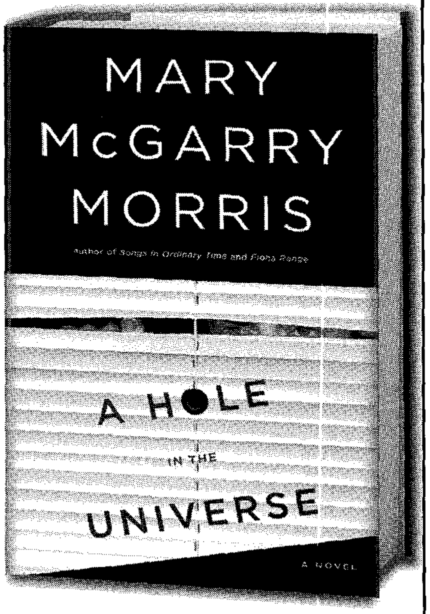

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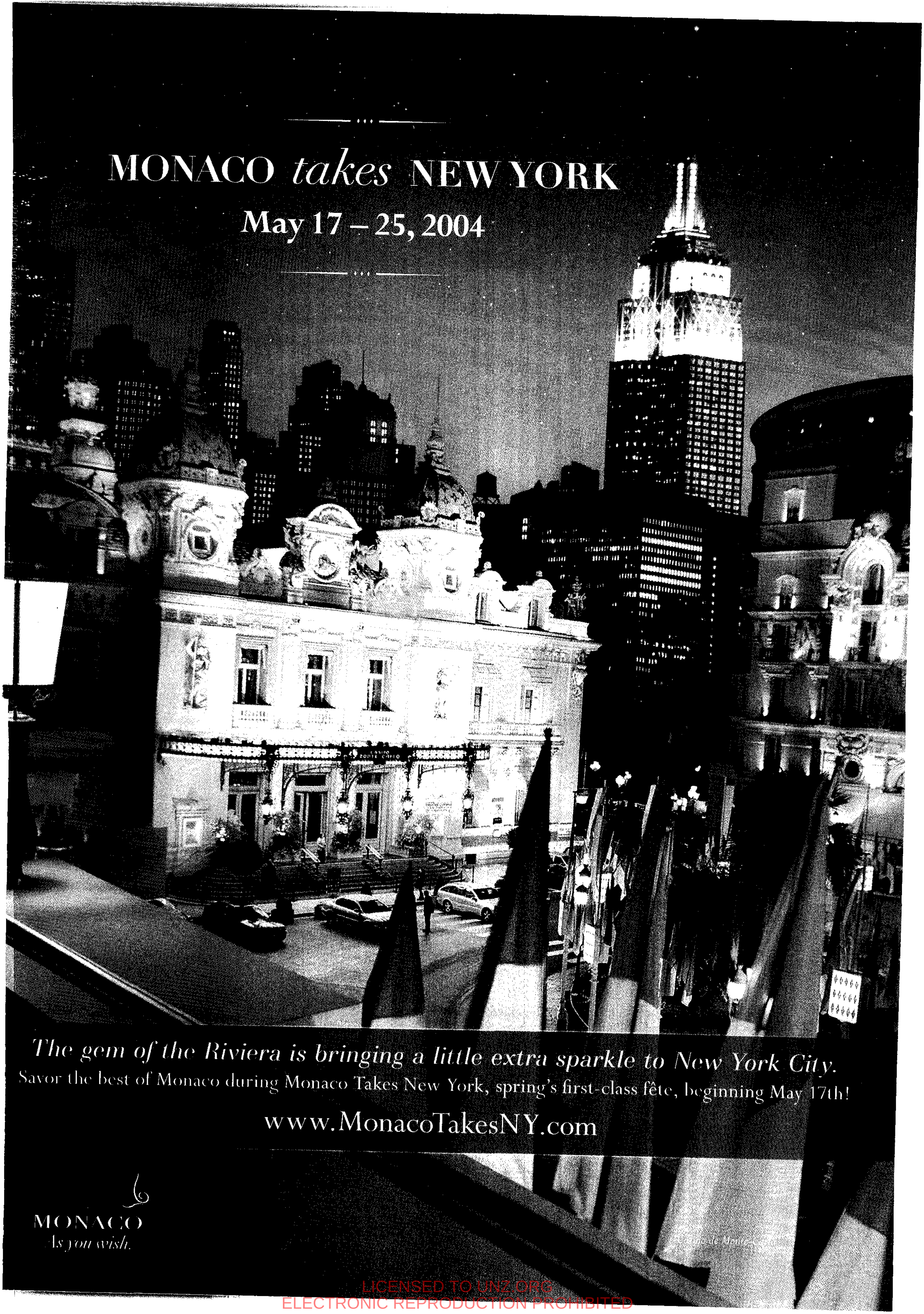

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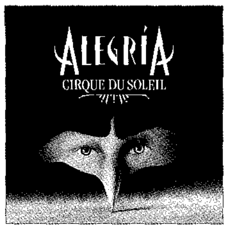

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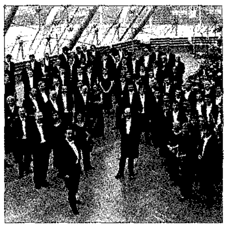

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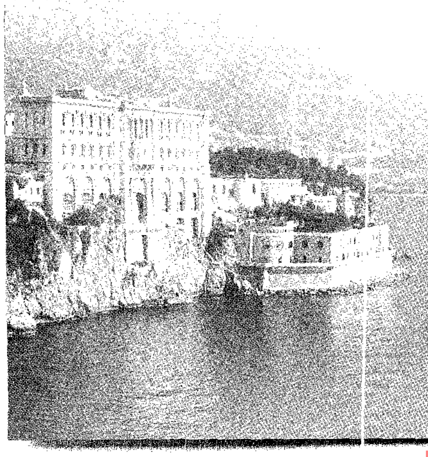

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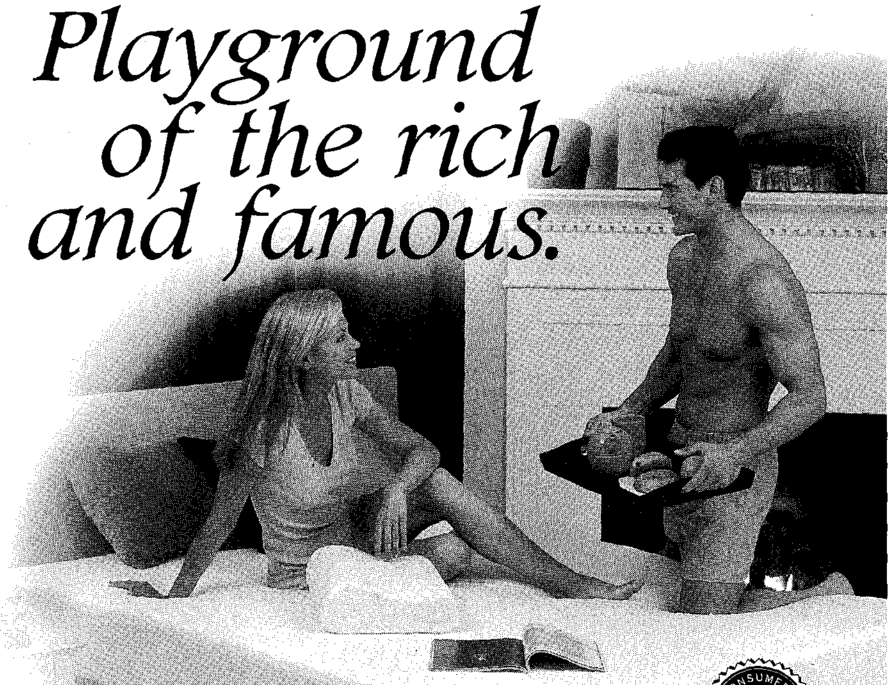
Card Dealer" in medium-sized towns in six Midwestern states. The people who paid "would get another shipment the next month," he recalled.

Despite strong sales, Hall decided fairly quickly that postcards did not fill any deep and abiding human need, and would someday be proved a fad. Christmas cards, Easter cards, valentines, and other examples of what we now refer to collectively as greeting cards, he thought, held more potential as vehicles for personal communication. He and Rollie, who had joined him in the business, added several greeting cards to their inventory and, in 1914, began to publish a few of their own, under the imprint Hall Brothers. In 1915, Joyce suggested to Jack Burroughs, a Hall Brothers salesman who sometimes wrote poetry instead of making sales, that he try writing verses for use on cards. Burroughs produced several samples, including this one (which he illustrated with a drawing of a puppy): "Not little like this tiny pup, / But big, just like a dog grown up. / I'm wishing you a Merry Christmas." Joyce later wrote, "While they may not seem very clever today, these were the first humorous sentiments used on greeting cards for special occasions. And they were an immediate success."

Hall, who never graduated from high school (although his David City alma mater did give him an honorary diploma, in 1962), was an intuitive marketing genius. He compiled detailed sales records for individual cards and remorselessly pruned slower-moving items from his line—novel practices at the time. He also set out to understand why people bought the cards they bought. He would stand outside stores and observe the behavior of customers through the windows; later, as the customers departed, he would ask them what had compelled them to buy, or why they had decided to buy nothing and what they had been hoping to find. He gradually concluded that people used cards to maintain emotional contact with friends and relatives, and that they wanted cards that helped them convey personal feelings that they were unable to formulate on their own.

This insight was the foundation of what would one day be a global business. In 1928, Hall, having decided that the name Hall Brothers sounded too old-fashioned, began adding a new name and logo to the back cover of each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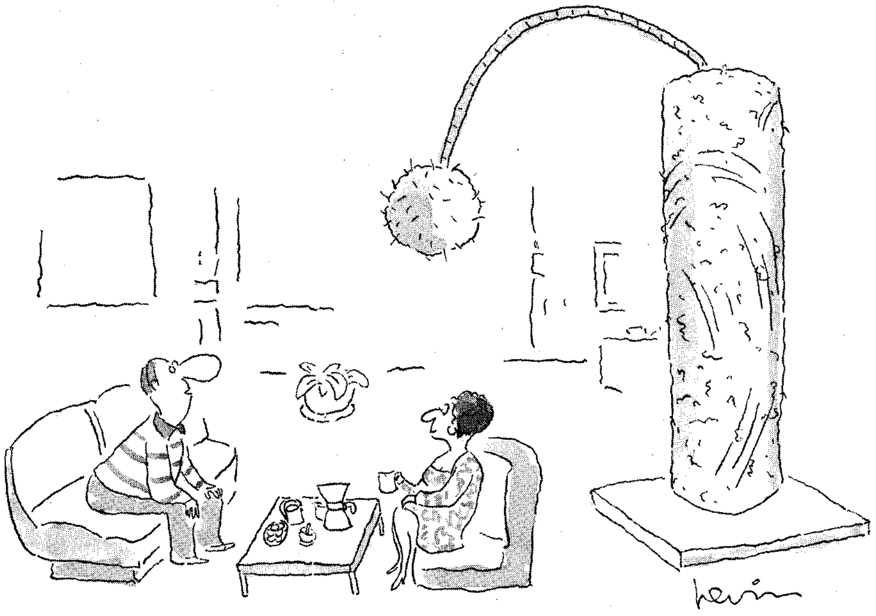


"I see you have a cat."

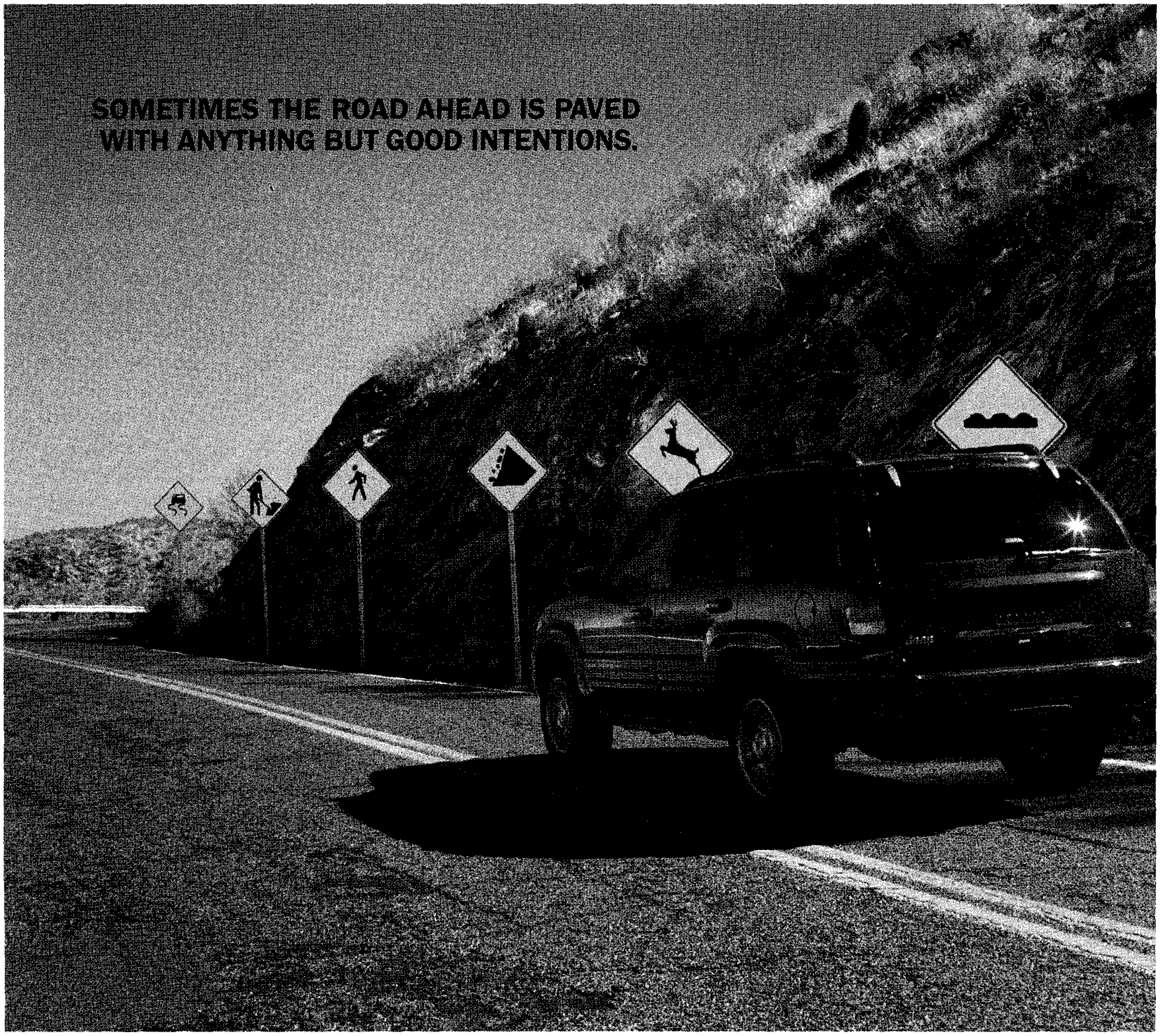
• •

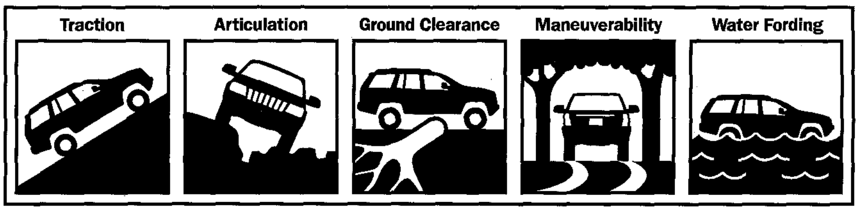
card that the company sold. He took out his first advertisement—a full page in the December, 1928, *Ladies' Home Journal*—and wrote the copy himself: "Love . . . friendship . . . devotion . . . happiness. . . . Your innermost feelings are aptly expressed in HALLMARK Greeting Cards. Each one carries a timely message . . . reflects your true sentiment in well-chosen words." The company's familiar slogan, "When you care enough to send the very best," was written by an executive named C. E. Goodman and was first used publicly, on the radio, in 1944. In 1951, the company moved its main promotional effort to television, by sponsoring the first of a series of family-oriented drama specials, which two years later became the "Hallmark Hall of Fame." These programs have won seventy-eight Emmys, and they constitute the longest-running series of its kind in the history of television. They have also consistently accomplished what Hall hoped they would: they have caused their (mostly female) viewers to associate the Hallmark name with quality, decency, and unashamed sentimentality, while inducing a selective spectrum of emotional responses—smiling, sniffling back tears, gentle weeping—that Hall had long since determined to be conducive to the buying and sending of his company's products. Today, Hallmark manufactures a little more than half of all the greeting cards sold in the United States.

Joyce Hall died in 1982, at the age of ninety-one, a respected and beloved man both within his company and in Kansas City, where Hallmark Cards remains a major institution—and where I, as it happens, grew up. Joyce's son, Donald Joyce Hall, succeeded him as the C.E.O.; the current C.E.O. is Donald Joyce Hall, Jr., who is forty-eight years old and was a year behind me in elementary school, junior high school, and high school. Donny Hall (as I can't help thinking of him) was never one of my close friends, but we participated in a number of the same school activities. I knew what his family's business was, as most other students surely did, but he never made a big thing of it, and I always thought of his parents more as car-pool drivers and football-game spectators than as the sort of people who could have buttered baked potatoes whenever they wanted them.

Hallmark employs roughly five thousand people in Kansas City, nineteen thousand worldwide. It publishes cards in more than thirty languages and owns a number of emotionally compatible businesses, including the Hallmark Channel, on cable TV, and Binney & Smith, the makers of Crayola crayons. It has annual revenues of a little more than four billion dollars, making it the thirty-third-largest privately owned company in the United States, with about the same revenues as Levi Strauss & Co., which is also private. Donald Hall, Sr., who now serves as the company's chairman, told me recently, "We've had a lot of opportunities to be otherwise, but being private always seemed extremely important to Dad, to me, to Don, to all of us. We don't have to shake and rumble over monthly statements, and we like to treat employees properly. That gets difficult to do in public companies, which have things like layoffs."

Of the five thousand people who work at the company's headquarters, only forty-eight are writers. This group includes former journalists, former advertising copywriters, an ex-nun, a psychiatric nurse, a musician who once played drums for Davy Jones, and a brother and sister. These people produce almost all the text that appears on the company's many thousands of cards and other products. (In the recent movie "Mr. Deeds," the title character, played by Adam Sandler, fulfills a personal dream by selling a freelance card idea to Hallmark—something that never happens in real life.) Hallmark writing jobs are so agreeable to the people who hold them that vacancies occur infrequently. Tina Neidlein, a humor writer who is twenty-nine years old and has worked at the company for two and a half years, told me, "I came to Hallmark from advertising, where there's so much turnover that it's basically just musical chairs. Now that I'm here, I'm never leaving." Neidlein—who, like Bill Gray, writes mostly for Shoebox—is one of fifteen Hallmark writers who specialize in humor. Before I met her, she had been described to me by other Hallmarkers as a "pop-culture maven" and the principal voice of youth on the humor-writing staff, and I had pictured her with pierced eyebrows, spiked hair, and a skull tattoo on her lower back. When I met her, though, she was wearing a brightly colored printed skirt and a turtleneck sweater and looked like a regular nice mom—which is what she is. (She and her husband, an engineer, have a year-and-a-half-old son.) The youthful demographic that Neidlein represents for Hallmark is not the one that listens to OutKast and writes computer viruses; it's the one that watches "Survivor" and drives minivans—young suburban mothers, who, in a


SOMETIMES THE ROAD AHEAD IS PAVED
WITH ANYTHING BUT GOOD INTENTIONS.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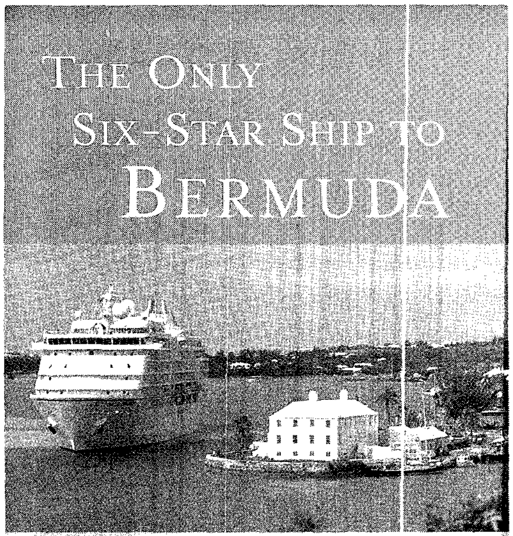

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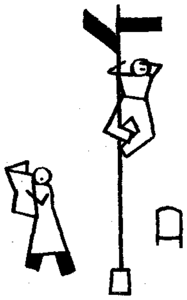
few more years, will begin to take their place as the nation's main consumers of greeting cards.

Neidlein, Gray, and the other Hallmark writers are divided among various departments within the company's huge, downtown headquarters, which was conceived by the architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, among others, and was built between the late sixties and the late eighties. The architecture is oddly staid, given Hallmark's business, and some of the cavernous work spaces have a claustrophobically subterranean feel. But there are also many appealing features, including a laid-back mini-department called the Writing Collaboratory and a fully stocked art-supply store where employees can sign out cool stuff to play with.

Much of the editorial work at Hallmark is done in groups. On any given day, shifting teams may assemble to brainstorm, to review one another's ideas, to plan coming seasonal lines, or to watch lots and lots of TV (a useful Zeitgeist check and a major source of inspiration). Every other month or so, the humor writers will take the afternoon off to see a popular new movie together. Neidlein says, "It kills, kills, kills my husband when I call him from work and say I'm on my way to go see 'Elf.'" During a typical workday, she writes fifteen or twenty card ideas, most of which she knows will be rejected—standard for the writing staff. Bill Gray told me, "A lot of people can write greeting cards, and a lot of people can write greeting cards as funny as the ones that Tina and I write—once. But they can't do it twenty times a day for fifteen years."



Humor-card ideas that fail to make it into the line may be turned down for a variety of reasons, of which "not funny enough" is not necessarily the most significant: people don't send cards just to make other people laugh. A woman shopping for a card to give to a friend at work isn't doing so because she thinks the friend is insufficiently amused; she's doing it because she wants to reinforce, extend, or define an emotional relationship—the reasons that Joyce Hall identified nearly a century ago. Humor may be the instrument she chooses, but the joke will always be subsidiary to, and must be compatible with, her underlying personal need. Derek McCracken, who is the writing manager of Hallmark's humor studio and is therefore Neidlein and Gray's immediate boss, told me, "There has to be an emotional hook, or the consumer probably won't buy it. It can be disheartening to go into a Hallmark store and watch people laugh at a funny card and put it back, laugh and put it back, laugh and put it back."

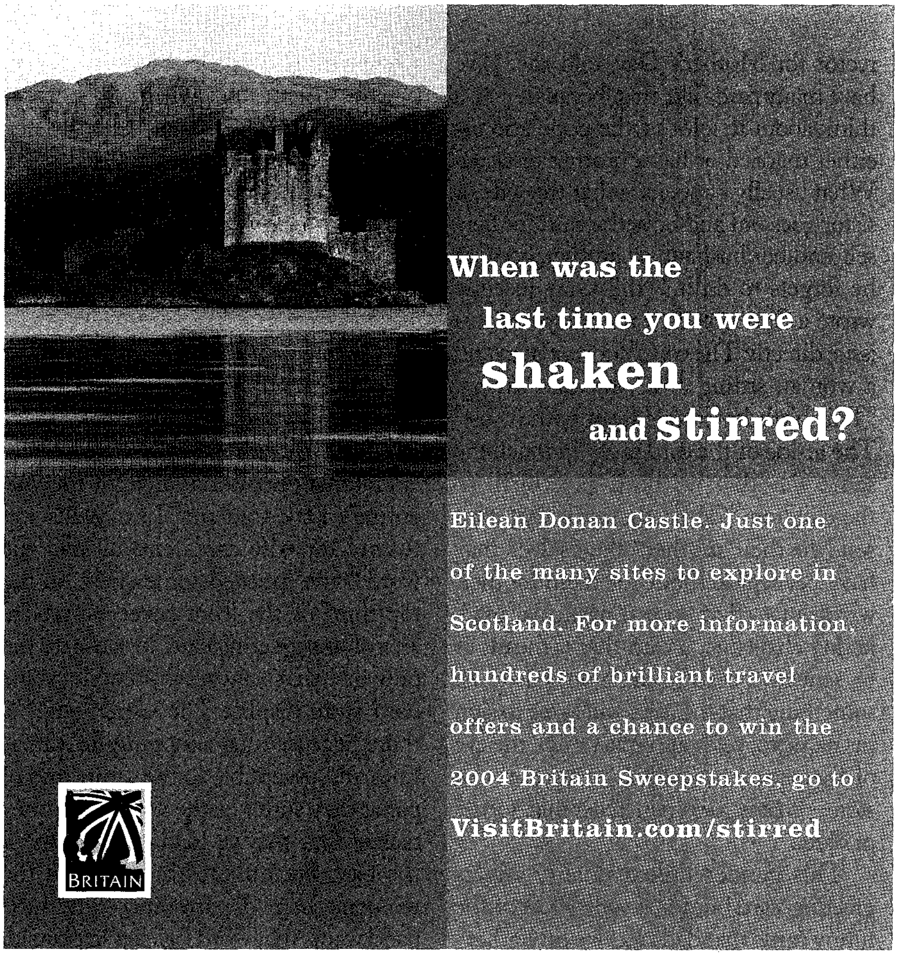
Being funny in the world at large is often a darkly passive-aggressive act; comedians dream of jokes that "kill." A humorous card has to leave both its sender and its recipient feeling better for the experience. McCracken showed me a successful birthday card whose message was "Son-in-law, you joined our family, which proves you've got taste, insight and most of all . . . COURAGE!" Most of the jokes on Shoebox cards are sharper than this one, which appeared on a nonalternative card, but even Shoebox jokes must meet the same requirement: any card, no matter how funny, is a failure unless enough consumers react to it by deciding to send it to someone else.

A big challenge for humor-card writers is thinking of new ways to execute certain archetypal ideas that consumers have demonstrated they expect to find in the line year after year. Scott Emmons—who has worked at Hallmark for ten years and is the next most junior member of the humor staff after Tina Neidlein—showed me a card of his that says, "Dad—on your birthday, I was going to wash your car. But then I remembered what you always told me: If you want something done right, you've gotta do it yourself!" (Glued to the inside of the card is a small sponge, a three-dimensional feature that Emmons thought of specifically to justify a higher price point for the card.) "The joke is very easy to get," Emmons explained, "and it's a little bit artificial, because the title—'Dad'—is right at the top. But it's a kind of joke setup we tend to use a lot. There's a whole category that we call 'gift gag,' and its basic message is: You're not getting a present from me, and I'm making a joke out of it. It's one of the classic formulas." Before working at Hallmark, Emmons was a professor of Latin and Greek at a small college in Kentucky. One of his specialties is writing humorous verse in anapestic tetrameter—the metrical scheme of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," various works by Dr. Seuss, and more than a few greeting cards.

Although certain card concepts may endure for decades, the markets for individual card lines tend to evolve. When Shoebox was launched, in 1986, the primary target audience was college-age women and women in their twenties. Many of those original consumers have remained loyal in the subsequent years, though, so the cards have had to age with them. "Our main target consumer is now a woman between something like forty-four and sixty-five," Renée Andriani, a Shoebox artist, told me. "She now has kids who are grown or are old enough to be doing things on their own, so we don't do quite so many jokes about babies. We used to do a lot of P.M.S. jokes; now we love menopause. We're all about menopause now."

Men and women, in addition to having different card-buying habits, also respond differently to the cards they receive—a distinction that is evident in a side-by-side comparison of popular Mother's Day cards and popular Father's Day cards. The best-selling Mother's Day cards tend to be adorned with ribbons, bows, flocking, sparkles, foil decorations, or other expensive add-ons, and their messages tend to be brazenly sentimental expressions of love, honor, and appreciation. The most popular Father's Day cards, in contrast, are less physically complex, contain fewer words, and are more likely to be funny. When you give your mom a card, you're hoping to make her cry; when you give your dad a card, you'll settle for a laugh.

Such differences are a perennial concern at Hallmark. For example, Mother's Day is one of the few card-sending occasions that have significant male "traction." That is, men are far more likely to send a card on Mother's Day than they are at most other times. This doesn't mean, however, that men necessarily shop for the cards that their mothers receive from them. One of the most important Mother's Day subcategories at Hallmark is known within the company as "from-multiple." These are cards that are meant to be given by more than one person—usually a married couple or a pair of siblings—and have messages like "Happy Mother's Day from the two of us." Nancy Saulsbury, who is Hallmark's editorial di-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shaken
and stirred?

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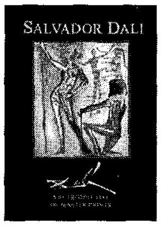
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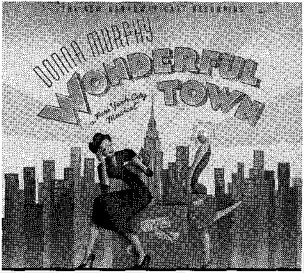
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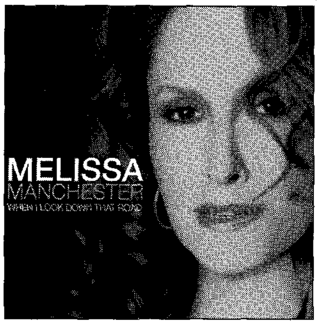
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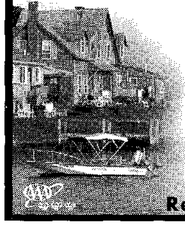
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rector for Mother's Day, told me, "We have many cards like that, because, if you think about it, a lot of the population is either married or has a brother or sister. What usually happens is that the wife or sister goes out and buys the card for herself and her husband or brother, because he forgets to do it." (Bill Gray recently wrote a Shoebox card that plays on this issue directly. The cover shows a man and a woman sitting at a table and saying, "This birthday card is from both of us!" The inside of the card says, "In much the same way that we both gave birth to the children.") Even the cards that men send to their mothers themselves may have been picked out for them by their wives, a fact that poses a particular marketing challenge: a card that is meant to be sent by a man to his mom has to be something that the man will agree to sign his name to, yet it also must catch the eye of the person most likely to select it in a store—that is, a woman in her mid-forties or older.

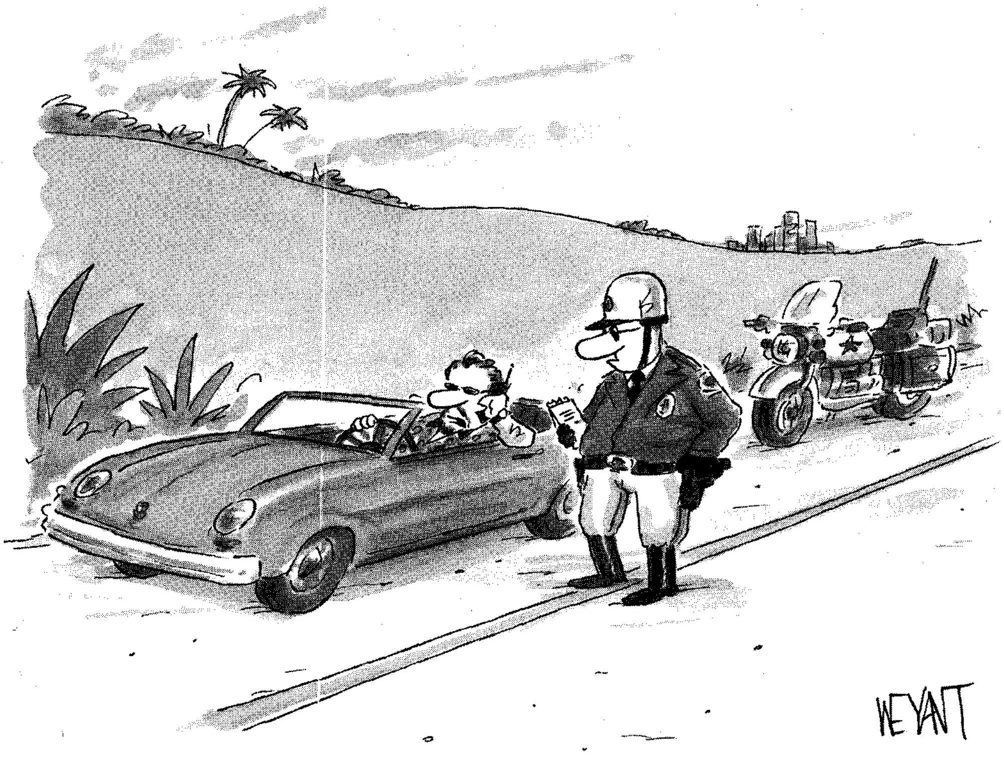
This gender-linked duality affects greeting-card humor as well. Most of the funny cards that dads receive on Father's Day are chosen by their daughters, by the wives of their sons, or by their own wives. The content of such cards may therefore reveal less about what men think is funny than it does about what women think of men. (Among the most popular themes of humorous Father's Day cards: golf, barbecuing, naps.) When men actually do buy cards on their own, they don't necessarily favor funny ones. In Hallmark's "for-wife" Valentine's Day category—one of the rare card categories in which the great majority of purchasers can be said with near-certainty to be male—few of the twenty most popular cards are humorous.

"Look how tender they are, almost like wedding cards," Pamela Kelley, who is Hallmark's editorial director for Valentine's Day, told me. Last year's top twenty for-wife cards also all had the word "wife" printed somewhere on the top third of the front cover—a crucial area of any greeting card, because it's the only one that's always visible in a standard store display. The word "wife" is there because men shopping for valentines are susceptible to the same kind of panic they suffer at the Gap when they realize that they've inadvertently spent the past five minutes browsing in the women's-jeans department. "The husband wants that word," Kelley explained. "He's standing there, he's nervous, he doesn't know if he's going to pick the right thing. His wife doesn't need that. She'll pick all kinds of cards, and she doesn't need to see 'husband' at the top."

Later, I asked Tressa Angell, who is the product manager for Mother's Day, if she ever got useful feedback about greeting cards from her husband, who doesn't work at Hallmark. Angell has been married for a little more than half a year. She said, "When my husband gives me a card, I usually feel I can tell how much time he spent picking it out. I look for language he never uses. Sometimes the first couple of lines will be pretty good, and I'll figure that that's how far he read before walking away with it."

A similar point was made two years ago in a revealing study of the greeting-card business. That study was performed not by Hallmark or by a marketing consultant but by the advertising agency DDB Chicago, in a commercial for Budweiser beer.

In the commercial, which first aired during the Super Bowl in 2002, an attractive young woman is shopping for a greeting card. She clearly is determined to find the one card that will perfectly express her feelings for someone important in her life, and she is in no hurry. Display racks containing hundreds of possibilities surround her, and she will examine every card if that's what it takes. "You truly are my true love"? No. "Our love shines like a beacon"? No. At last, she opens a card with four subtly colorful hearts on the cover, and smiles beatifically: she has found it. We cut to a noisy convenience store, where a scruffy-looking young man is buying a six-pack of Bud. He notices a few cards in a wire display next to the cash register, impulsively grabs one whose cover says "love is . . . ," and, without reading the message inside or even raising the flap of the envelope to get a closer look at the garish sunset depicted on the cover, drops the card on top of his beer. We cut to a table for two, where the same woman and man are now sharing an intimate meal. The woman is reading the card that the man bought in the convenience store. In a voice at the edge of tears, she says, "It's perfect," and the man looks as proud as if he'd written it himself. ♦



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THE POLITICAL SCENE

STOOPING TO CONQUER

Why candidates need to make fun of themselves.

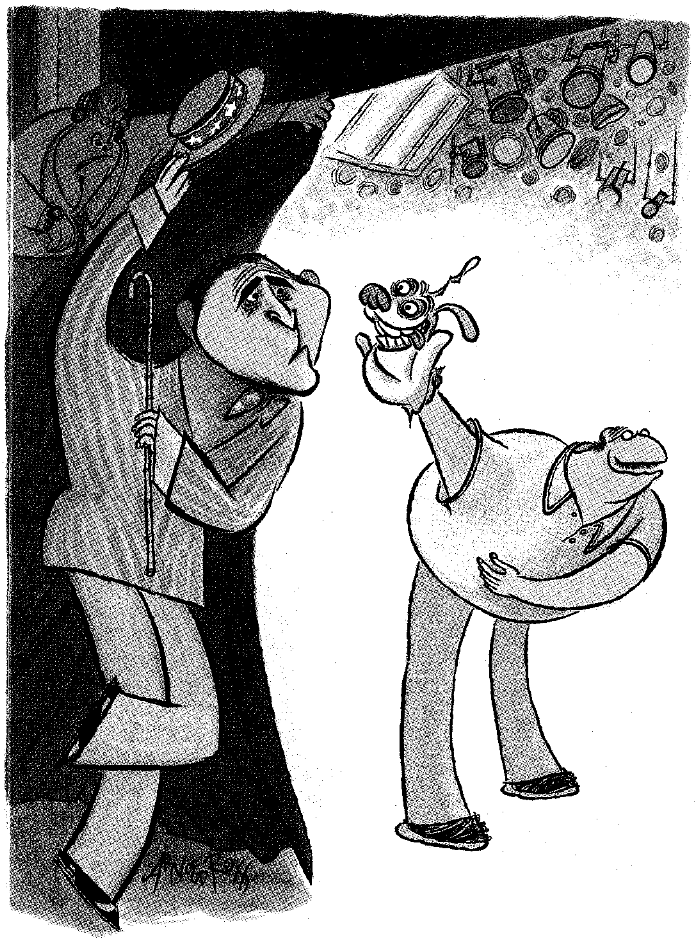
BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

Three days after placing third in the Iowa caucuses and delivering the much replayed "scream," Howard Dean made a taped appearance on the "Late Show with David Letterman." His task was to deliver the Top Ten list of "ways I, Howard Dean, can turn things around":

10. Switch to decaf.
9. Unveil new slogan: "Vote for Dean and get one dollar off your next purchase at Blimpie."
8. Marry Rachel on the final episode of "Friends."
7. Don't change a thing—it's going great.
6. Show a little more skin.
5. Go on "American Idol" and give 'em a taste of these pipes.
4. Start working out and speaking with Austrian accent.
3. I can't give specifics yet, but it involves Ted Danson.
2. Fire the staffer who suggested we do this lousy Top Ten List instead of actually campaigning.
1. Oh, I don't know—maybe fewer crazy, red-faced rants.

Dean followed up the "Letterman" appearance with an interview with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show." When the segment aired, the day before the New Hampshire primary, it consisted mostly of voice-overs of the two men's "thoughts." At one point, Dean was asked his position on gay marriage. As he held forth, his answer was drowned out by Stewart's interior monologue: "Mrs. Jon Dean . . . Mr. Howard Stewart . . . Howard and Jon Dean . . . Dr. and Mr. Jon Dean-Stewart."

Dean's performances on late-night television in no way distinguished him from his rivals. While stumping in Iowa, Representative Dick Gephardt, of Missouri, also showed up on "Letterman," in his case to enumerate the ten "signs you've been on the campaign trail too long." (No. 6: "You ask yourself, 'What would Schwarzenegger do?' " No. 2: "You agree to appear on a lame late-night talk show.") Right before officially entering the Presidential race, last September, Senator John Edwards, of North Carolina, "announced" his candidacy on "The Daily Show." And, the day after the Missouri primary, Edwards duly recited his list of ten "things never before said by a Presidential candidate." (No. 7: "I'd give you my plan for economic recovery if I wasn't rip-stinkin' drunk.")



Is indignity the price of connecting, or is indignity itself the point?

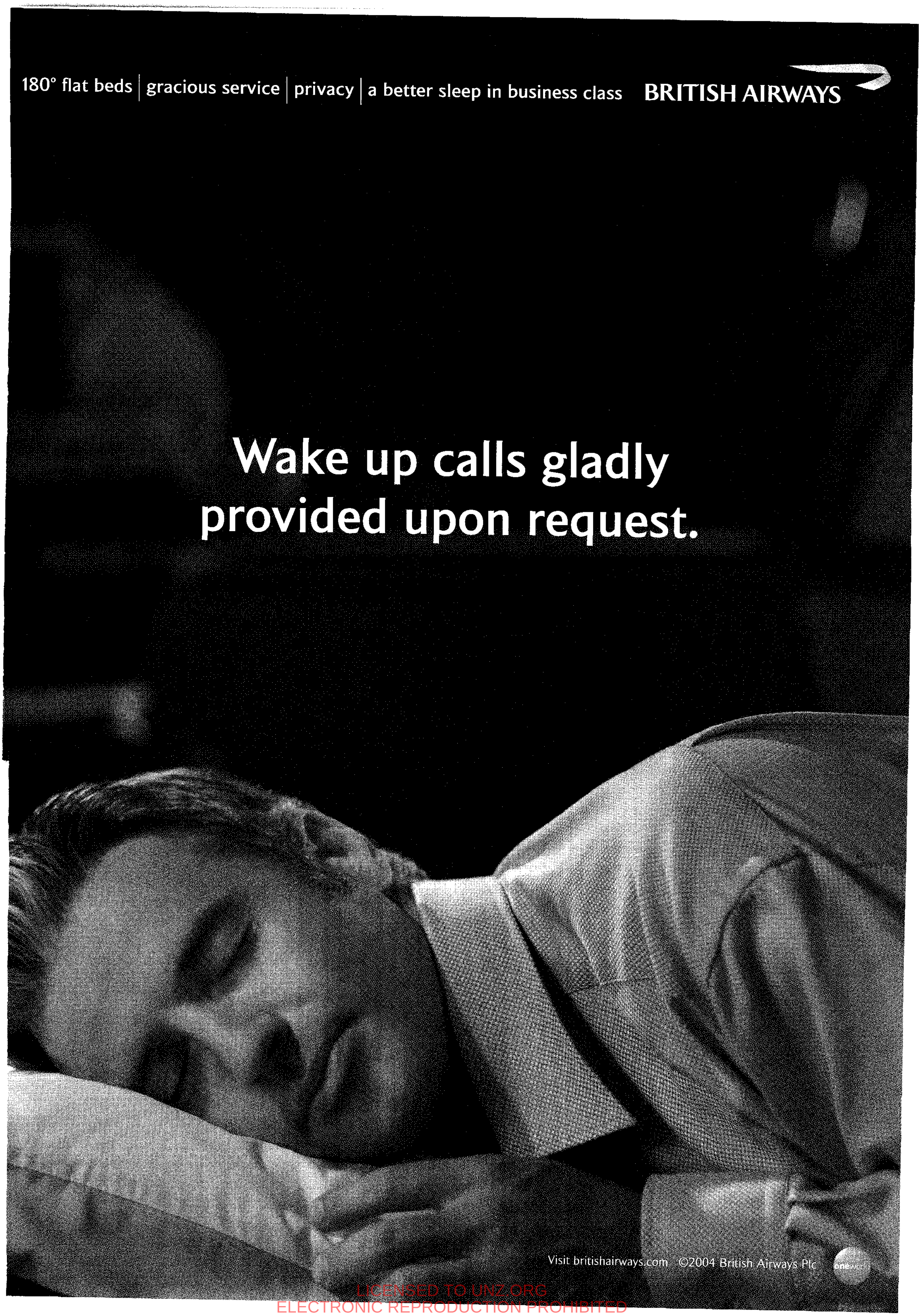
ARNOLD ROTH

Making fun of politicians is a pastime practically as old as politics itself. Before the Greeks got around to inventing romantic comedy, they amused themselves by lampooning their leaders; in Aristophanes' "The Knights," for instance, the Athenian despot Cleon is replaced in office by a sausage seller. (Standard garb for actors in the days of "old comedy" was a padded suit and a large red leather phallus.) The Romans, too, loved a witty put-down, like this one, aimed at Caesar and reported by Dio Cassius: "If you behave well, you will be punished; if you behave badly, you will be king."

What sets contemporary political humor apart is its curious—one is tempted to say unprecedented—configuration. In the new comic order, the most devastating joke is circulated not by an irreverent observer or a sly opponent but by the target himself, who appears on national television solely in order to deliver it. There seem to be two ways to look at this trend: as a sign of how seriously we now take light entertainment or as an indication of how lightly we have come to regard politics. Either way, it's an unsettling development. Perhaps Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog, put it best when he was given a better time slot than Senator John Kerry, of Massachusetts, recently on the "Tonight Show."

"John Kerry, a war veteran, has to follow a freaking dog puppet!" he shrieked. "What's going on in America?"

Not long ago, I went to the Museum of Television and Radio, on West Fifty-second Street, to see episode No. 15 of "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In." When the episode originally aired, on September 16, 1968, "Laugh-In" was just beginning its first full season—it had débuted eight months earlier, as a mid-season replacement—but was about to become the No. 1 show on television. The program begins with all the usual "Laugh-In" mayhem. "It must be 'Sock it to me' time," a youthful Goldie Hawn announces, before hitting herself over



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the head with a plastic mallet. The mayor of Burbank gets pelted with Ping-Pong balls; Joanne Worley is doused with water; Ruth Buzzi is crushed by a stage set; and Judy Carne is pelted, doused, crushed, and then sprayed by a skunk. Still wet, she answers a phone, and on the other end (ostensibly) is Governor Nelson Rockefeller. "Oh, no, I don't think we could get Mr. Nixon to stand still for a 'Sock it to me,' " she chirps, at which point the show cuts away to Richard Nixon.

Nixon's appearance on "Laugh-In" lasts four seconds. At first, he is looking stage right; then he turns toward the camera. He widens his eyes in what seems to be an effort at feigned surprise but comes off looking more like mock dismay. "Sock it to me?" he asks, drawing out the "me?" in a way that suggests he has perhaps never heard the line before.

STERN COUNTRY

For sleeplessness, your head face down, your shoulder blades
floating, and aspirin as a last resort, when
death is threatening, though lately I have experimented
with numbers and as for dreams I've never been boring
and only once did I bite the arm of a woman
sitting next to me and I should be careful
she might have a handwritten poem or a memoir
and didn't I bite her arm, and aren't we both
poets, though I warn her that I make gurgling
noises and twitch in both legs and make the bed
jump and I am exhausted from looking at poems
and I don't care about her nuts and bolts
and she has to go to the wilderness herself
and fuck the exercises, let her get smashed
by a Mack truck, then she'll be ready to mourn.

—*Gerald Stern*

Episode No. 15 was broadcast at the height of Nixon's (ultimately successful) campaign against Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and was an immediate sensation. George Schlatter, the creator of "Laugh-In," now runs a television production company in Los Angeles. He told me that Nixon had been extremely reluctant to be on the show; although the producers had repeatedly entreated him to appear, his campaign aides had even more insistently urged him not to. Eventually, the race brought Nixon out to Los Angeles. He gave a press conference, and Schlatter and one of "Laugh-In" 's writers, Paul Keyes, who happened to be a close friend of the former Vice-President's, went over to watch it, bringing a TV camera with them.

"While his advisers were telling him not to do it, Paul was telling him how much it would mean to his career," Schlatter recalled. "And we went in, and he said, 'Sock it to me.' It took about six takes, because it sounded angry: 'Sock-it-to-me!' After that, we grabbed the tape and escaped before his advisers got to him.

"Then, realizing what we had done—because he did come out looking like a nice guy—we pursued Humphrey all over the country, trying to get him to say, 'I'll sock it to you, Dick!' " Schlatter went on. "And Humphrey later said that not doing it may have cost him the election. We didn't realize how effective it was going to be. But there were other factors in the election, too—I can't take all the blame."

Nixon on "Laugh-In" is often cited as a watershed moment in the history of television—the unthinking man's version of Nixon in China. What had once seemed antithetical—parody and power—had proved not to be. Was the joke on Nixon or on his hosts? Who could say? But, if the episode announced the new order, many people, including Nixon himself, seemed not to have noticed. As President, he never went near "Laugh-In," or anything like it. Indeed, according to Schlatter, he became critical of the show and eventually pressured NBC into muffling its politics.

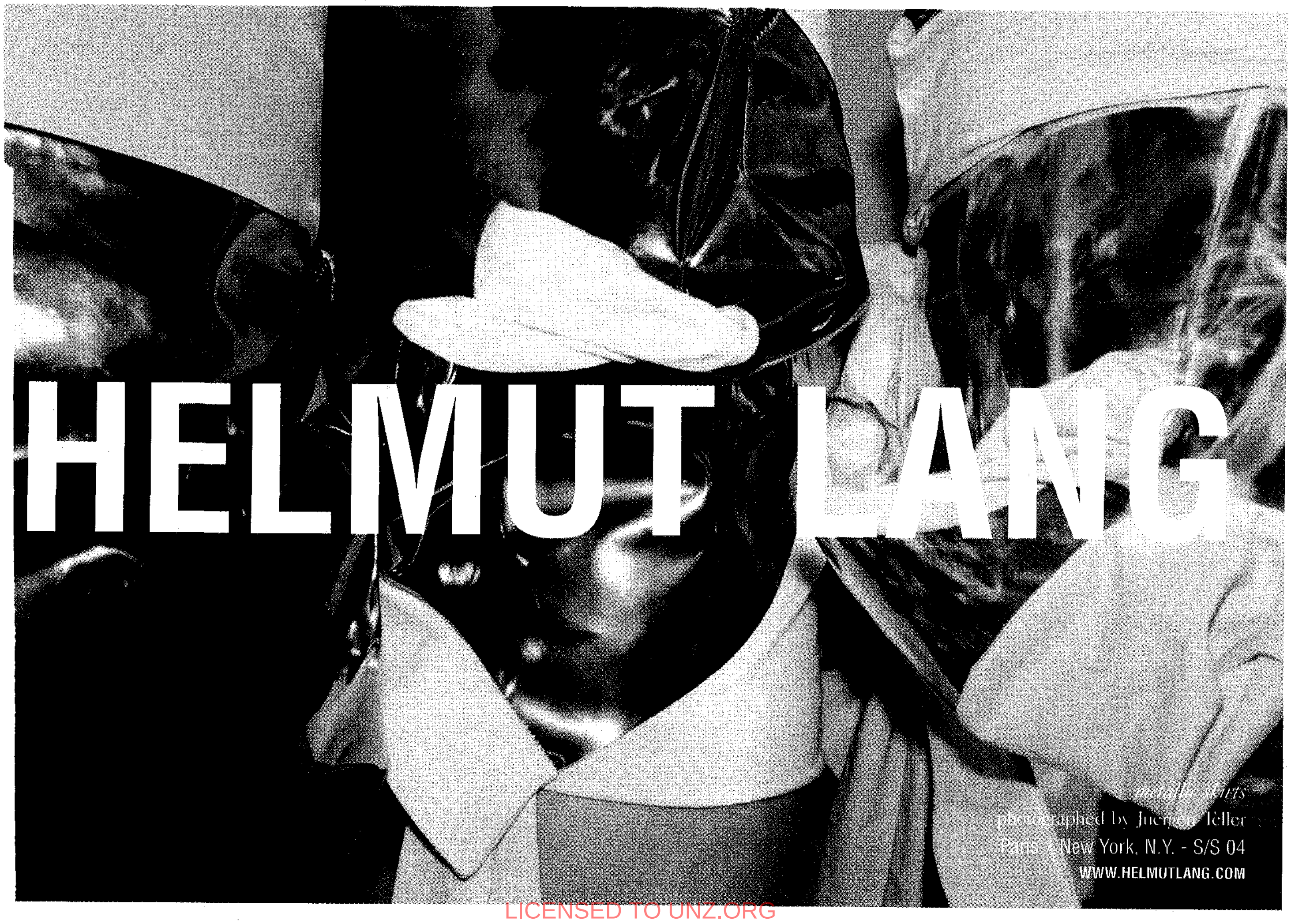
"Laugh-In" 's godchild "Saturday Night Live" premièred in the fall of 1975. Its approach to political satire was less staccato and more sustained. Week after week, Chevy Chase portrayed Gerald Ford, a former college football star, as an irredeemable klutz. The following spring, Ford's press secretary, Ron Nessen, agreed to appear on "S.N.L." as a guest host. In one sketch, Nessen, playing himself, looked on indulgently as Chase, playing Ford, lurched around the set, stapling his ear and signing his hand instead of a piece of tax legislation. Nessen's participation in the show was widely criticized—reportedly by the head of NBC, among others—as demeaning to the Presidency, even though, in an early example of life imitating parody, Ford himself appeared in the same episode, on tape, to recite a variation of Chase's signature line: "I'm Gerald Ford and you're not." ("There's really nothing you can do in that situation," Ford said years later. "You can't stand up and say, 'I was the best athlete' and all that stuff.")

The next four years were a period of strict separation: Jimmy Carter avoided humor, at least of the purposeful variety, whenever possible. (Jerome Doolittle, a White House speechwriter who sometimes composed funny lines for Carter, likened his role to that of Franklin Roosevelt's tap-dance coach.) "Who do they think they elected?" Carter supposedly once asked a staff member who was urging him to be more lighthearted. "Fred Allen?"

A few days after watching Richard Nixon on "Laugh-In," I went down to Washington to meet Landon Parvin. Parvin, who is fifty-five, is a slight man with pale-blue eyes, prominent ears, and gray hair that sticks up from the top of his head, like Homer Price's. He has an earnest manner, which tends to surprise people who have first been introduced to him, as it were, through his work. Depending on how you look at things, Parvin is either the capital's funniest serious speechwriter or its most serious funny one. He is particularly in demand during what is referred to in Washington as the "silly season," when the nation's leaders gather at a series of dinners to listen to the powerful crack jokes. If the program consists of four speeches, it is not uncommon for Parvin to have written three of them, and it is not unheard of for him to have written all four. In January, for instance, for the annual dinner of the Alfalfa Club—an association of political and corporate bigwigs named for the plant whose roots, according to club lore, "will do anything for a drink"—Parvin wrote the speech delivered by President Bush, and the one delivered by Jack Valenti, the Alfalfa nominee for President of the United States, and also the one delivered by the outgoing club president, Vernon Jordan. "As I look around the room, I am reminded that it is a long way from the public-housing projects of Atlanta to the presidency of Alfalfa," Jordan said in his remarks, which, in keeping with capital tradition, were labelled "off the record," then extensively reported anyway. "I only wish my daddy—Strom Thurmond—could see me tonight!"

I had been urged to visit Parvin by people who remembered or, perhaps more accurately, remembered having heard about a groundbreaking bit he wrote back in 1982, when he was working as a speechwriter in the Reagan White House. That spring, Nancy Reagan had decided to sing a song at the Gridiron Club dinner, and it fell to Parvin to come up with the lyrics. The assignment was an unpromising one. The Gridiron Club, an association made up of assorted members of the Washington media élite, exists solely in order to spoof the even more powerful. Among the numerous public-relations debacles of Mrs. Reagan's first year had been a trip to England during which she was photographed wearing fifteen different outfits and the purchase, in the midst of a national recession, of a set of china valued at two hundred thousand dollars. The first lyrics that Parvin wrote, to the tune of "Second Hand Rose," Mrs. Reagan rejected as too easy on her, so in the next set he took aim directly at the First Lady's image problems. "Even though they tell me that I'm no longer queen / Did Ronnie have to buy me that new sewing machine?" she asked plaintively. Then she smashed a plate on the floor. The number—entitled "Second Hand Clothes"—was such a hit that Mrs. Reagan had to sing it twice; Parvin hadn't thought to write her an encore. When, in the months that followed, the First Lady began to receive better press coverage, the shift was attributed to her song-and-dance routine.

Mrs. Reagan's success makes sense only by the logic of self-parody, according to which, as in fairy tales, straw is gold. The First Lady didn't answer her critics' charges; she merely repeated them, in the process emptying them of one kind of significance and filling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them with another. As Parvin put it to me, if a politician can make fun of his faults he is, in effect, saying, "I'm not really worried about it; you shouldn't be, either."

"What most people don't realize is there are two kinds of political humor," Parvin went on. "There is the kind satirists do. Then, there's what I do. The easiest thing in the world, I learned in the White House, is to get a zinger on the evening news. The press will pick it up like that. But what I learned over the years is that that doesn't necessarily serve the politician's purpose, because what you want is for him to be better liked. Really, that is the purpose of political humor for a politician: to be better liked."

Parvin left the White House in 1984, and in the years since has written hundreds of speeches, for scores of politicians. He prefers straight speeches, like the inaugural address he composed last fall for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, of California, but he is constantly getting calls from people who want him to repeat the trick he performed for Mrs. Reagan.

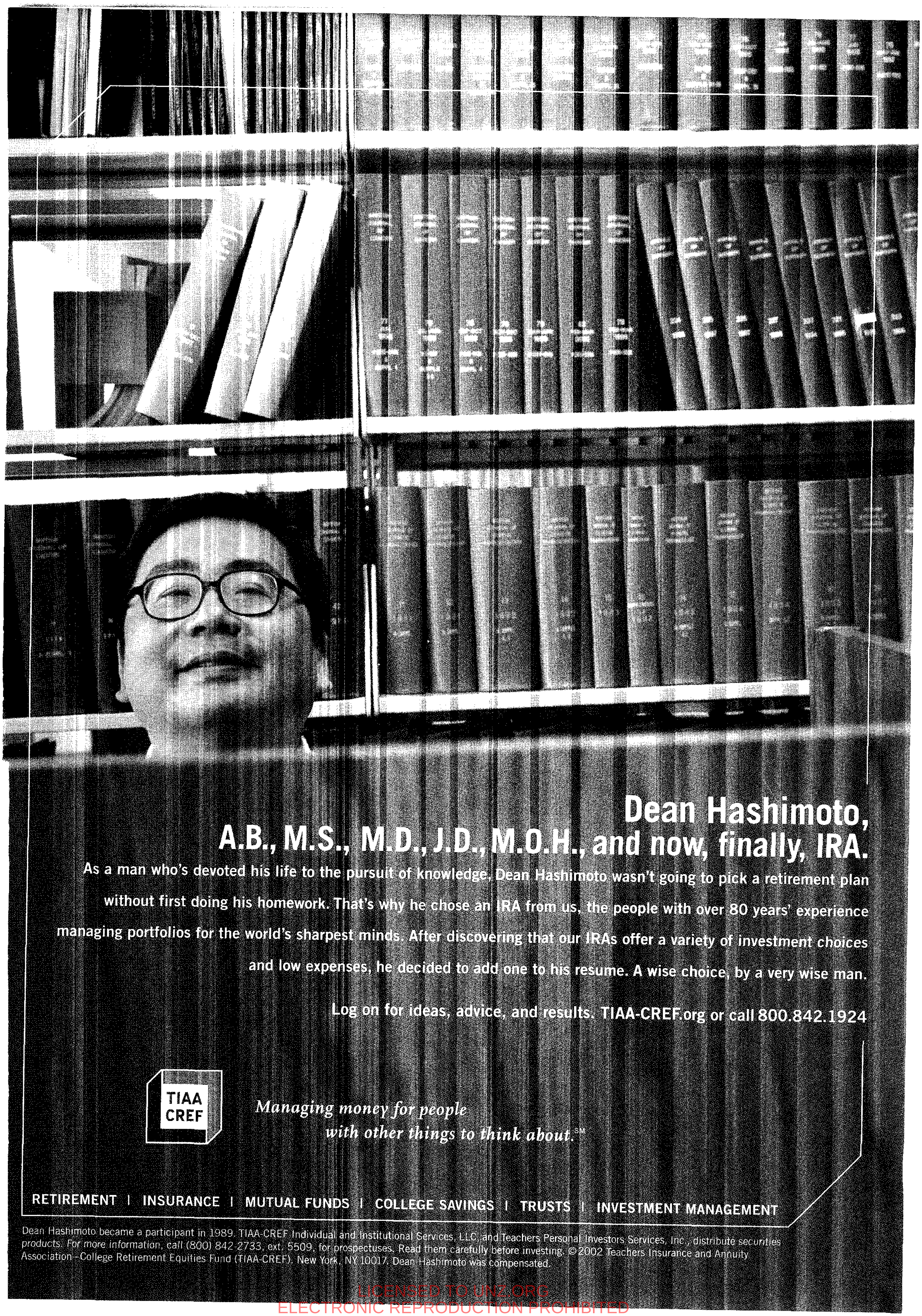
"A politician will be in some trouble and he'll say, 'Will you do me some lines on it?,' because he's heard that humor can get him out of trouble," Parvin told me. Sometimes he can help, and sometimes the trouble—misuse of public funds, for example—is intractable. "I tell them, depending on the situation, 'No, this is trouble. You should not make fun of this.' "

On March 1, 2000, shortly before the New York Presidential primary, George Bush, then the governor of Texas, made the first of his election-year appearances on the "Late Show with David Letterman." It was an educational experience for him. Bush seems to have only half understood why he was there, and so he came prepared with several jokes about Letterman, who had recently undergone heart bypass surgery. "It's about time you had the heart to invite me," Bush said early in the show, prompting a round of boos. Later, Letterman asked what he meant by his slogan "I'm a uniter, not a divider." Bush replied, "It means when it comes time to sew up your chest cavity, we use stitches," a line that elicited more boos from the audience. At one point, when the conversation grew particularly testy, Letterman said to Bush: "Let me remind you of one thing, Governor: the road to Washington runs through me." Bush at least knew enough not to argue with this. At the end of the interview, he held up a "Dweebs for Bush" T-shirt that he had had specially made for the occasion.

Bush did not make the same mistake again. Later in the campaign, appearing as himself to introduce a special election edition of "Saturday Night Live," he announced, "When they asked me to help introduce tonight's special, I felt fairly ambilavent. Although I'm a big fan, I've seen things on the show I thought were, in a word, offensible." He also gamely went on the "Tonight Show" to misspeak, pronouncing the word "flammable," for instance, "flammamababable." And when he went back on "Letterman" he vowed that, if elected, he would "make sure the White House library has lots of books with big print and pictures." Meanwhile, Vice-President Al Gore was similarly making the late-night-comedy rounds, poking fun at his woodenness, his pedantry, and his tendency to exaggerate his own achievements. "Remember, America: I gave you the Internet, and I can take it away," he said on "Letterman." On the election edition of "S.N.L.," which aired just two days before voters went to the polls, he declared, "I was one of the very first to be offended by material on 'Saturday Night Live.' " Even after losing, Gore continued to make the comedic rounds, appearing, for example, on "S.N.L." again, in December, 2002, to sit, half naked, in a hot tub.

One frequently offered explanation for what happened between Nixon's going on "Laugh-In" and Bush's and Gore's going on everything is the shift

"I'm a stay-at-home mom without kids."



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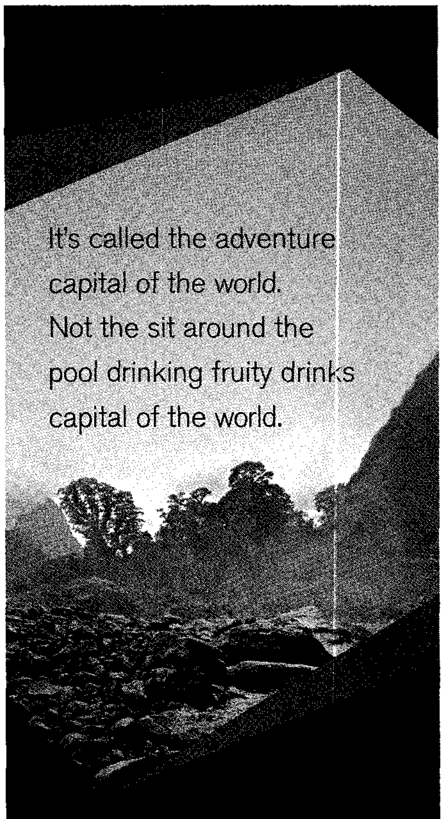
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in American viewing habits. In 1968, thirty-five million Americans tuned in every night to the network news, out of a total TV-owning audience of fifty-six million households. Although by 1992, when Bill Clinton went on "The Arsenio Hall Show" to play "Heartbreak Hotel" on his sax, network-news viewership had increased slightly to thirty-nine million, the total TV audience had nearly doubled, to 92.1 million. By 2000, network-news viewership had dropped to twenty-nine million, while the total audience continued to increase, to a hundred and one million households.

A few months ago, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press set out to quantify how Americans were getting information about the current Presidential campaign. In a randomized survey, fifteen hundred adults were presented with a list of possible sources and asked which ones they were "regularly learning" something from. Among all age groups, the network news shows were cited by thirty-five per cent and daily newspapers by thirty-one per cent. Among respondents under the age of thirty, those figures both drop to twenty-three per cent. Comedy shows, meanwhile, were cited by twenty-one per cent of young people as a source that they regularly "learned" something from. And these numbers, disconcerting as they may be, only begin to tell the story.

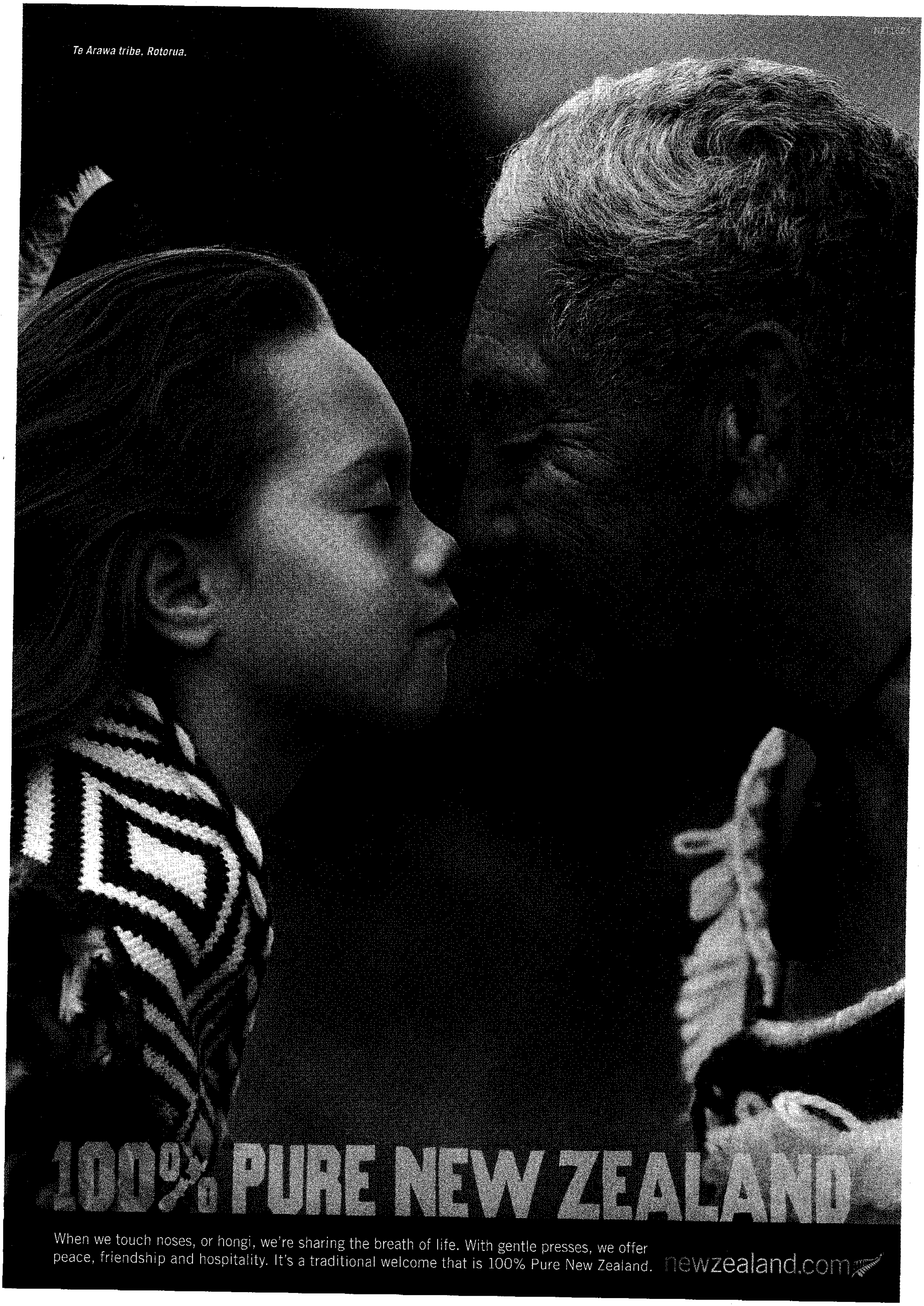
Owing to the way that elections operate, the most sought-after voters also tend to be the most indifferent ones—those who, deep into a campaign, still don't have a clear impression of the candidates in contention. "My guess is that ninety-five per cent of the people watching 'Meet the Press' already have decided whom they're going to vote for," Jon Macks, a former political consultant who now writes for Jay Leno, told me. "Nothing is going to make them change their mind. But there's a lot of people that watch the 'Tonight Show,' or any of the shows like it, who are going to see someone and they are going to connect."

Looked at in these terms, an exercise like delivering the Top Ten list comes to seem just another way of reaching a critical demographic, like touring a senior citizens' center or learning Spanish. The indignity of it is simply the price the candidate pays to achieve his purpose, which is always to "connect." What this account misses, however, is the extent to which indignity *is* the purpose.

Consider, for example, President Bush's recent jokes about the U.S.'s failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. At the annual Radio and Television Correspondents' dinner last month, the President presented a slide show in which he appeared as a hapless dupe, rummaging under the furniture in the Oval Office, as if for a set of lost keys. "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere," he said brightly. The sketch, which Landon Parvin helped write, made no sense as an appeal to the youth vote—it was presented to an audience of reporters. But it was entirely consistent with the notion of preëmptive self-mockery. (When the slide show provoked outrage, a White House spokeswoman declared that the President was just "poking fun at himself," as if no further defense were needed.)

As I spoke to people who write political comedy, I kept hearing versions of Parvin's theory. Mark Katz, who recently published a memoir about his experiences writing jokes for the Clinton White House, told me, "Humor is all about acquiring political capital through likability." Al Franken, who has written for, among others, Gore and Hillary Clinton, put it this way: "Americans don't want their President or their senators to be the funniest person in the world. They just want to see that their senator or their President has a sense of humor and is a human being."

As has often been observed, one of the ways in which television has changed politics is by collapsing distinctions—enlarging the trivial and trivializing the large. In this context—the context of no context—any claim to significance is fated to descend into parody. While aspiring to be likable, or just a human being, seems a modest goal for the leader of the free world, it may, at this point, be the best that can be hoped for. When Humphrey declined to say, "I'll sock it to you, Dick!," a reluctance to compromise one's dignity could still be claimed as a political virtue. Now it can be seen for what it is: a liability that needs to be corrected by appearing, say, after a dog puppet. ♦



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Can the Farrelly brothers resurrect "The Three Stooges"?

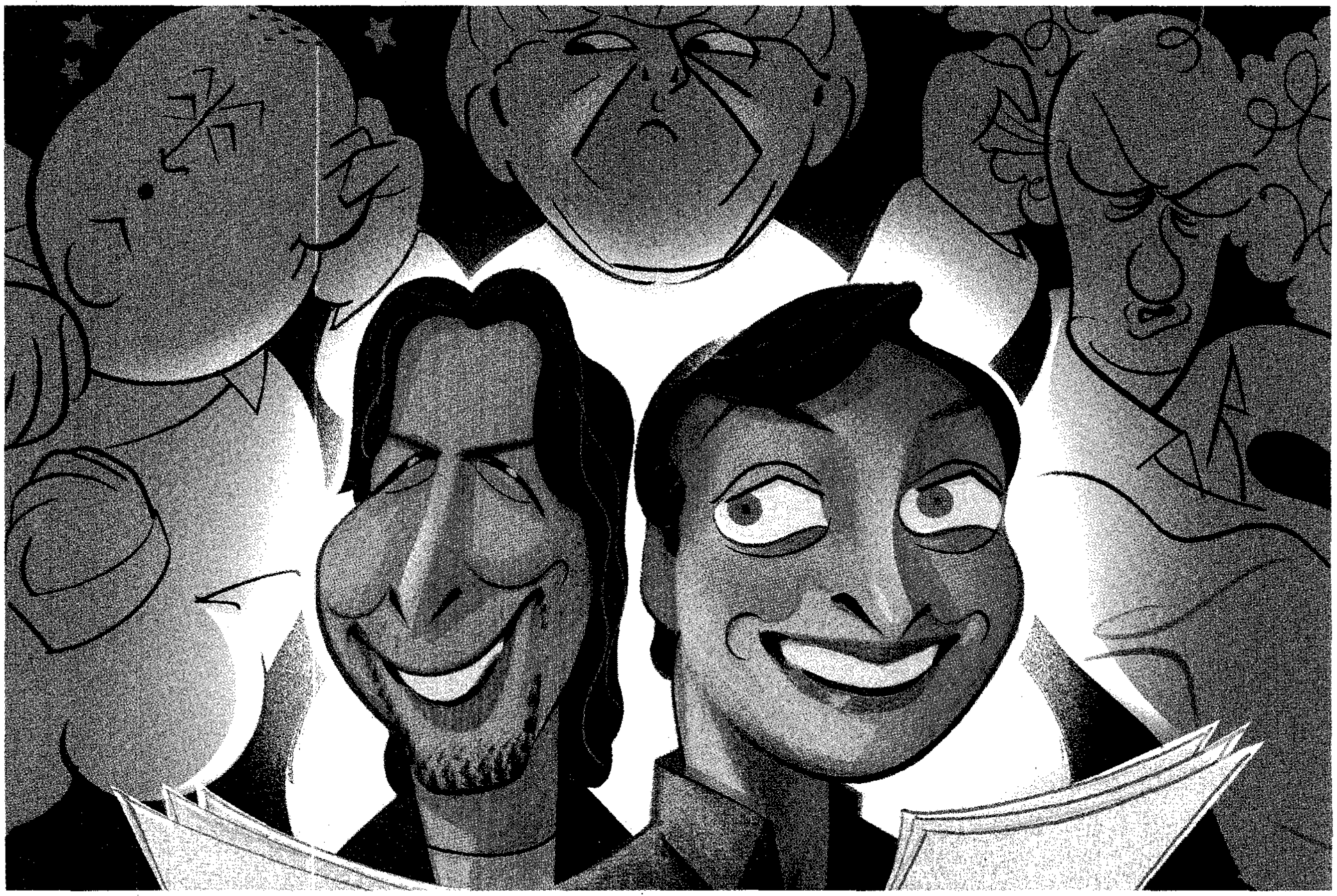
BY IAN PARKER

In March, seventy years after the release of the first Three Stooges short, "Woman Haters"—the only one spoken in rhyming couplets—Peter and Bobby Farrelly met up in a hotel in the ski resort of Sun Valley, Idaho, to resume work on a script that they started two years ago and that some people hope they never finish. The brothers, who wrote and directed "Dumb & Dumber," "There's Something About Mary," "Shallow Hal," and other vulgar, warmhearted comedies, had a month to produce the second draft of "The Three Stooges," a script that places the trio in the present day, and gives them a degree of present-day frankness about bodily functions—as well as access to chain saws and microwave ovens. The deadline had been set, in part, by Russell Crowe, whom they were hoping to cast as Moe, the angriest and most violent Stooge.

The afternoon of their first day in Idaho, the Farrellys and their co-writer on the script, Mike Cerrone, a friend since childhood, were in Peter's room, scrutinizing a scene that updates a familiar Stooge setup. Moe (pudding-bowl haircut), Larry (unruly hair), and Curly (no hair) are dressed in white medical scrubs, standing around a nun lying semi-conscious on an operating table with her abdomen cut open. The Stooges work on her with an electric toothbrush, and then with a vacuum cleaner. Peter—a little clump of beard on his chin, loose corduroy pants—read aloud from the script while Bobby sat in an armchair, his feet, in clean white sneakers, propped on the coffee table: "As Moe sticks the nozzle in and starts vacuuming, we hear some big stuff clanking and rattling up into the machine. Suddenly, there's a whining sound, as if something's stuck. Curly turns it off and Moe holds up the vacuum nozzle, revealing a wishbone stuck in the end. Larry and Curly each grab an end and start pulling." Peter paused. "You know, I think Moe should take the thing. He's got to use it as a weapon. He wouldn't let that get by."

Should Moe, in typical fashion, jam the wishbone up Larry's nose? Should Moe use the wishbone to hook Larry's nose and, holding him off the ground, give him a karate chop to the neck? Or should the bone go in one nostril and out the other? As the three men debated the matter, they wandered in and out of the bathroom and then out onto the terrace. It offered a sunny view of the valley, which was beginning to thaw and drip; below, a few people were skating to Sinatra songs on an ice rink.

Bobby, who, at forty-five, is the younger of the brothers by eighteen months, answered his cell phone—"Mmm-*yello!*"—and talked with his wife and children, who have been living with him in a rented house in Sun Valley for the past year.



Peter (left) and Bobby Farrelly. "There's a lot at stake," Peter said. "It's the Stooges. There's a huge fan base. To some, this is sacrilege."

Peter, who has longer hair and a longer face than Bobby, brewed green tea and took vitamins. (Both Farrellys are family men who like to golf, and although their films are known for drawing likable, romantic-comedy characters into graphic sexual and digestive set pieces, they are not in a perpetually boisterous, spring-break mood. "There's a lot at stake," Peter had said earlier. "It's the Stooges. There's a huge fan base. To some, this is sacrilege.") Cerrone began whistling the Stooges' "Three Blind Mice" theme. A big, square-jawed former pro-hockey player and car dealer, he is a kind of Farrelly muse, for whom lust and anger are similarly expressed through gritted teeth.

"You took the turd out, yeah?" he said, recalling a gag from an early draft.

"What turd out?" Peter replied, distractedly.

"You remember the turd."

"Oh, yeah, it lands in a woman's mouth, and Larry says, 'Hey! What's the big idea? No smoking!' "

They returned to the wishbone, and agreed that it should go up one nostril but not out the other. "We don't want a special-effects fest," Bobby said. Peter began to read again, switching voices from Stooge to Stooge. "Moe: 'Forceps.' Larry: 'Sorry, my rabbi got mine. . . .' Moe: 'Oh, a wise guy, eh? Open your mouth.' Larry does so and Moe jams an eggbeater in and begins twirling. . . ."

In the early decades of cinema, a feature film was likely to be preceded by a burst of slapstick: a two-reel comedy, fifteen or so minutes long. The Three Stooges made a hundred and ninety of these shorts for Columbia Pictures. Shot cheaply over a few days, and originally with a lineup of Moe Howard, Curly Howard, and Larry Fine—their given names were Moses Horwitz, Jerome Horwitz, and Louis Fienberg—a Stooges comedy typically featured three short men failing badly as detectives, firemen, or veterinarians. Plots were minimal: "The Stooges are plumbers; there's your plot," as Bobby Farrelly put it. Of the three, Moe was the scowling leader—a caricature of adulthood. Larry was the fragile, wounded adolescent of the group ("One of us is crazy, and it ain't you," he says to Moe, in "Crash Goes the Hash"); and Curly was the disturbed child, with a private language of winsomely balletic arm movements, yelps, barks, and the "nyuk, nyuk, nyuk" of short-lived satisfaction. (After Curly suffered a series of strokes, in the mid-forties, he was replaced by Shemp, a third Howard brother, who had performed with them in vaudeville, and who claimed the title of "the ugliest man in Hollywood." Curly died in 1952, and when Shemp died of a heart attack, in 1955, he was replaced by Joe Besser, whose brief Stooges career was doomed by his contractual refusal to be hit.)

The trio's humor was in large part verbal—Lawyer: "Drop the vernacular." Curly: "Vernacular? That's a derby"—but what distinguished the Stooges from their live-action competition was a level of accidental and deliberate violence more often seen in cartoons. To the amusement of some people more than others, the Stooges jab fingers into one another's eyes, swing skillets and icepicks, and combine these blows into elaborately choreographed sequences. There can be seventy face slaps in a single short. "What's that for? We didn't do nothin'!" Larry and Curly complain after a double slap from Moe in "Hoi Polloi" (1935). "That's in case you do, and I'm not around," Moe explains. Stooges fans become connoisseurs of this material. In his book "The Complete Three Stooges," Jon Solomon notes that in "Slippery Silks" (1936) "there is no sound effect when Curly plunges scissors into Moe's rear; 'plink' will not be used until 1941."

Columbia dropped the trio in 1957, and closed the shorts department the following year. But, as histories of the Stooges recall, it was at this same moment that television revived their back catalogue, and by 1959 old Stooges shorts were being shown on television stations across America. The Stooges—now with Curly Joe DeRita in place of Joe Besser—entered a kind of posthumous golden age. They earned no residual payments from TV but took advantage of their renewed fame by making personal appearances, and starring in a handful of unloved full-length features—"The Three Stooges in Orbit," "Snow White and the Three Stooges"—that tested their audience's stamina for watching what were now quite elderly men stiffly slapping each other without cause or effect.

The Farrelly brothers were born in 1956 and 1958, and watched old Stooges reruns in the living room of their suburban Rhode Island home. The Far-

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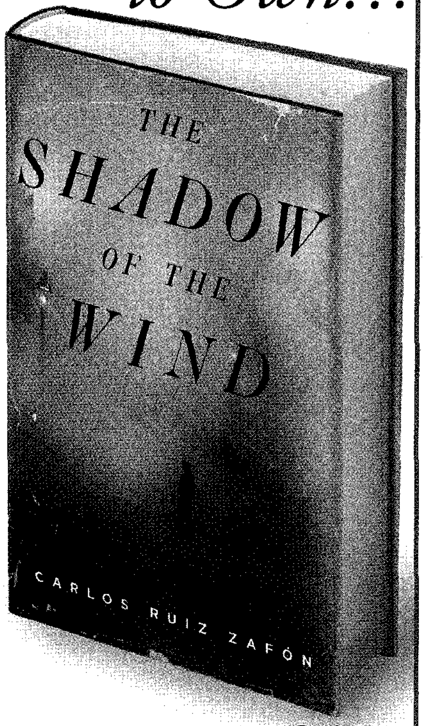

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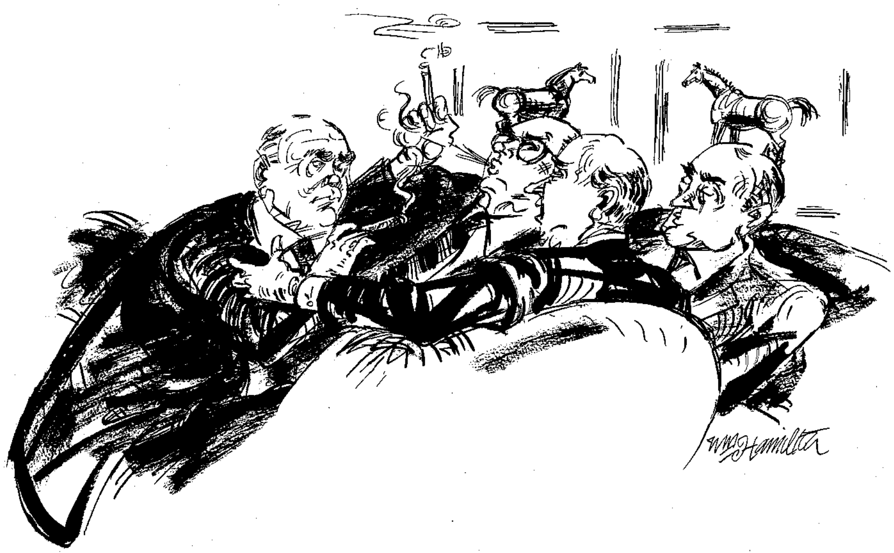


"Sure, I exploited, but I never outsourced."

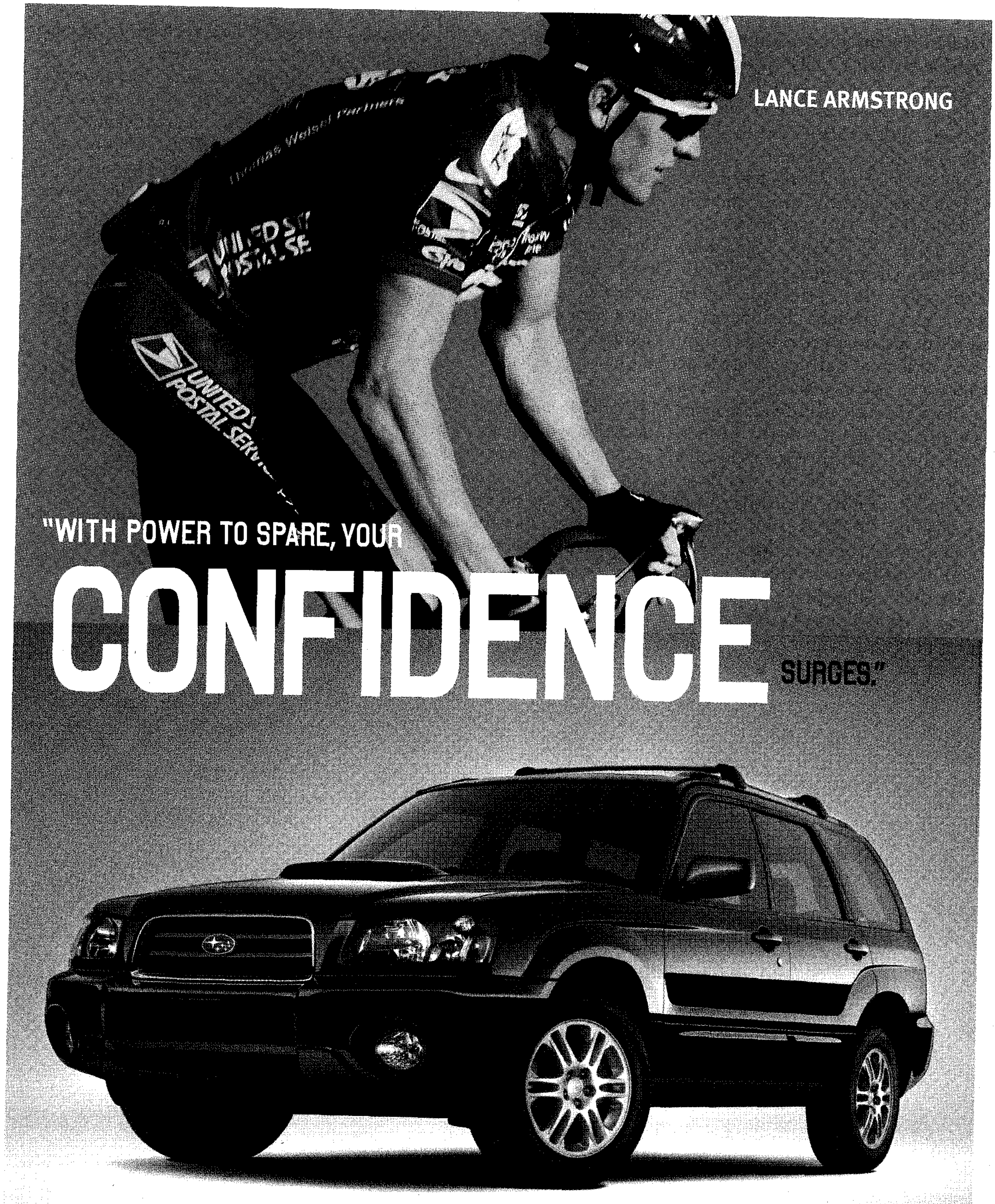
rellys' father, a doctor, and their mother, a nurse-practitioner, discouraged the boys and their three sisters from watching weekday television, and "there were much bigger Stoogeophiles than us," Bobby recalled. "Most of the kids in school knew all the lines and could imitate the characters. We were never the class clowns. We were the *audience* for the class clowns." But they knew enough to be fans; for Peter, the Stooges' appeal lay not only in the intoxicating excess of hitting but also in their implied promise that adulthood would feel much like childhood. "You know, I remember being ten or eleven and making a pact with my friends that when we got older, whatever happened, we'd all live on the same street," he said. "We knew there would be families and so on, but we didn't want to ever part. The Stooges seemed to have pulled that off. They were grown men, but they still acted like boys." Peter has a theory of Stooge appreciation, based upon his own changing allegiances: "Growing up, first you watched Curly, then Moe, and then your eyes got to Larry. He's the reactor, the most vulnerable. Five to fourteen, Curly; fourteen to twenty-one, Moe. Anyone out of college, if you're not looking at Larry, you don't have a good brain."

Moe and Larry died in 1975. The Farrellys became adults—Peter emerging as the more voluble brother, more neurotic, more left-wing, and quicker to expose himself in public. Whereas Bobby could be persuaded at weddings to strip to his underwear and imitate a sumo wrestler, Peter's trick was to wait for the dancing to begin, then collect an armful of unattended cameras, and, in the bathroom, take one memorable photograph with each camera.

Peter first worked as a salesman, then got an M.F.A. at Columbia University (where, next month, he will give a commencement address). In 1985, he moved to Los Angeles to write comedy. Bobby joined him not long after, having failed to market circular beach towels that did not need to be turned as the sun moved. In 1994, the brothers had a worldwide hit when they directed their own screenplay, "Dumb & Dumber," in which Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels drive across America in a Stooge-like state of alert incomprehension, establishing a Farrelly template of male characters who are simultaneously adult and adolescent. Two years later, as the brothers were working on a follow-up, "Kingpin," it struck them that no one had made a modern Stooges movie—"a complete oversight," according to Peter. Their lawyer (who is also one of their sisters) learned that the rights to the Stooges names and images were held by C3 Entertainment, a company controlled by the ensemble's heirs. They were emerging from a long period of inter-Stooge legal disputes—one imagines pokes in the eye, crunched noses—and were eager to license a movie project. "But we couldn't come up with the right formula," Earl Benjamin, the president of C3 and the stepson of Curly Joe DeRita, recalled. "I saw dozens of scripts, most of them awful. We had 'em frozen and coming from the past. We had 'em going to a psychologist to see why they were violent. I remember a meeting with Amy Pascal"—then the chairman of Columbia Pictures—"and she said, 'Why don't we have them show their feminine side?' " Benjamin laughed. "I said, 'Amy, they're the Stooges—they don't *have* a feminine side.' "

The Farrellys had an equally frustrating discussion with a Hollywood executive. "He did not seem respectful of what the Stooges are," Peter recalled. "He was rolling his eyes." Finally, in 2000, the Farrellys met with Lorenzo di Bonaventura, who at the time was the head of production at Warner Bros. Pictures. The Farrellys were expected to lay out some kind of story line, but, as Benjamin remembered it, "Pete and Bobby sat down, and then Pete looked at Lorenzo and he just said, 'Dumb, Dumber & Dumbest.' And Lorenzo said, 'Sold.' "

I recently spoke with Kathleen Chamberlain, who teaches in the Department of English at Emory & Henry College, in Virginia, and is part of a tiny community of academics who have studied the Three Stooges. She has published a paper, "The Three Stooges and the Commedia dell'Arte," and has given lectures on the trio at meetings of the Popular Culture Association. Chamberlain said that although the Stooges shorts can barely be said to have plots, they collectively have "a contextual arc. Their triumph—slapstick and silly though it is—is often over the pretensions of the rich and the stuffed-shirted. And, even if the Stooges don't change very much, they say a lot about the ability of the ordinary person—and they're even *less* than the ordinary person—to survive." A contemporary Stooges film, she suggested, would need to supplement this background hum of optimism with something more solid—she recommended as a possible model "A Night at the Opera," in which the Marx Brothers find purpose by giving aid to young lovers. Chamberlain said that she trusted the Farrellys, who have been adept at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organizing anarchic material into engaging plots; she even identifies in their work a vaguely Stooge-like response to women. "In the Farrelly universe, there's a woman present, but she's always sort of alien," she said, citing the characters played by Cameron Diaz, in "There's Something About Mary," and Gwyneth Paltrow, in "Shallow Hal." "That's also the Stooges: a world in which women aren't really necessary. The boys function happily together; they share a giant bed. Women come along now and then, but it's a world of friendship and bonding, where emotional needs and physical needs are met by the male community."

Stooges fans outside the academy are more wary. Earl Benjamin receives messages every week advising against the project, and a recent discussion on threestooges.net, a fan Web site, was filled with disapproval. "What I've always feared is this film will be no more than a pastiche of familiar (to us anyways) Stoogian scenes, without the inspiration that the Stooges could bring to fairly ordinary plot elements, with gross-out humor added to 'update' the comedy," wrote one contributor, adding that he doubted that the Farrellys could equal the original trio's "unique combination of vaudeville sensibility, sight gags, oddball satire, and utter mayhem."

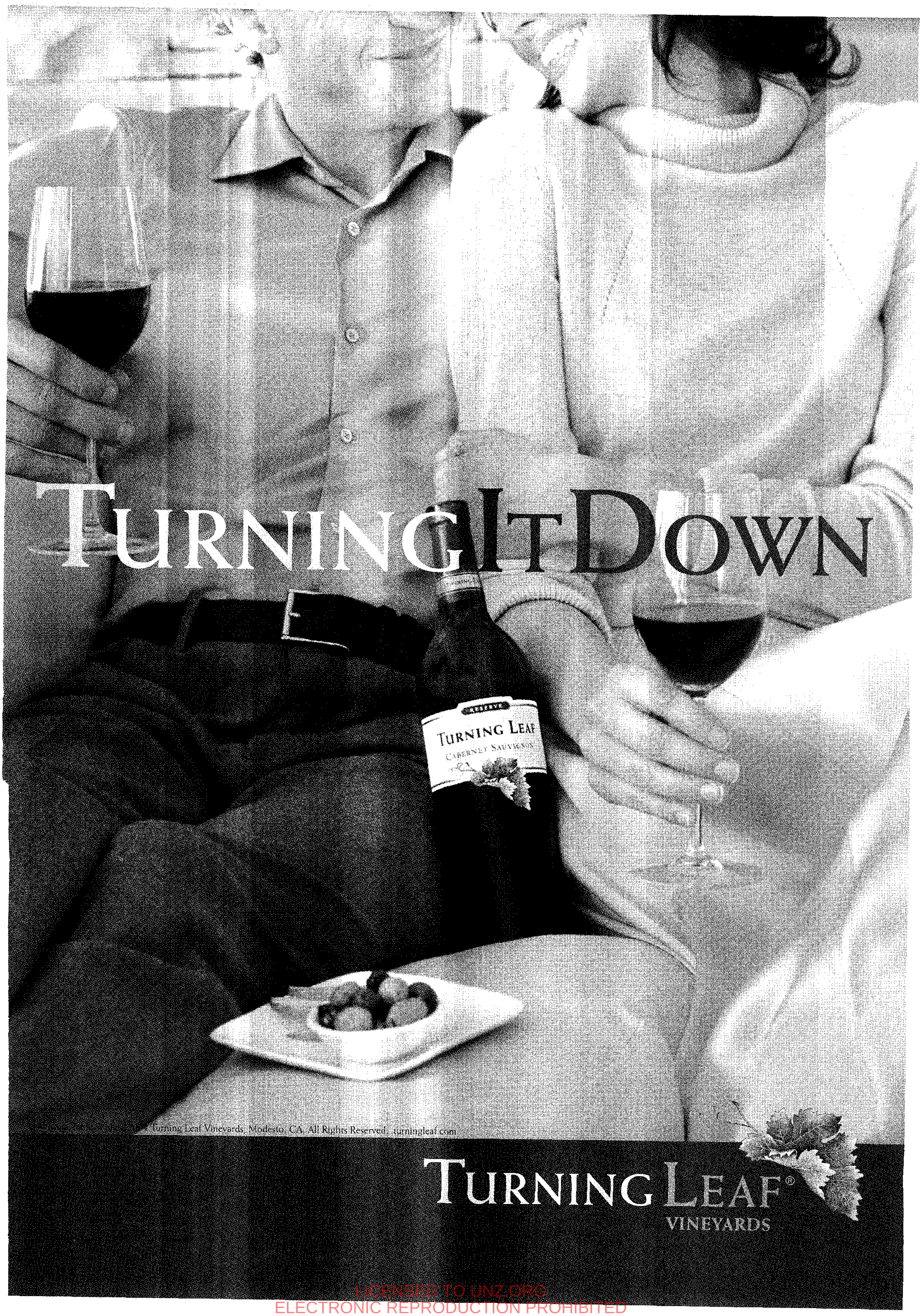
"Here's an idea," another fan wrote, facetiously. "How about getting Moe Howard, Larry Fine, and Curly Howard to play . . . Moe, Larry, and Curly? If they can't get those actors (and nobody else) to play the parts, then they should pack it in." Another wrote, "I don't care if you get John Gielgud, Ian McKellen, and Ben Kingsley to play the Stooges: the movie will suck."

Earl Benjamin thought of the Farrellys as the "kings of physical comedy"—but they had not made slapstick of a kind that the Stooges would recognize. Their films had Stooge-like moments, including the snowball thrown into a woman's face in "Dumb & Dumber" (the scene became funny to test-screening audiences only after the Farrellys added, at the moment of contact, the sound effect of Hank Aaron hitting a home run); and the Farrellys did share with the Stooges a willingness to keep a gag going longer than an audience expected—rediscovering the laugh with a postscripted, after-the-calm hit (or, in the case of a famous scene in "Dumb & Dumber," shit). But, as Bobby told me, "Ours isn't slapping comedy, it's sight-gag comedy"—a distinction reinforced by "There's Something About Mary," which has made three hundred and sixty-five million dollars since its release, in 1998, and is best known for the scenes involving Ben Stiller's genitals being caught in a zipper, and semen mistaken for hair gel by Cameron Diaz.

The Farrellys sat down with Mike Cerrone in January, 2002, in a rented house in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, to write a first draft of the script. The challenge was evident. "How the hell do you maintain a movie that's a slap fest for an hour and a half, without losing the audience?" Peter recently asked. "And how do you make the audience give a shit in the last fifteen minutes, if it's the Stooges? You've got to care, even if it's just a little. 'Dumb & Dumber' was slapstick, a lot of set pieces, but you gave a shit. Ultimately, you wanted to know what happened with Jim Carrey and that girl—even if only just a little." For all their moments of unblinking obscenity, the Farrellys are traditional filmmakers, who seem to have tricked a generation of young men into enjoying romantic comedies. Although the R-rated "Me, Myself & Irene" (2000) had scenes—such as one in which Jim Carrey sucked a woman's lactating breast—that Chris Weitz, the co-director of "American Pie," found "as disturbing as any crazy European art film," the Farrellys had by 2002 begun what they half-seriously call their "sweet trilogy." These PG-13-rated romances took on subjects that seem at first too delicate to be handled by the Farrellys (obesity, conjoined twins, and—in their recently finished film, "The Ringer"—the Special Olympics). Yet the protagonists follow arcs of self-improvement, and the movies promote themes of equality and decency.

The Three Stooges, of course, never saw an arc in their lives. "They're cartoon guys, they're bulletproof—you hit them and they don't really hurt," Bobby said. Movies are about advancement, and yet the Stooges never advance. (A "Seinfeld" episode once traded on this idea, by

"Aren't we supposed to feed them?"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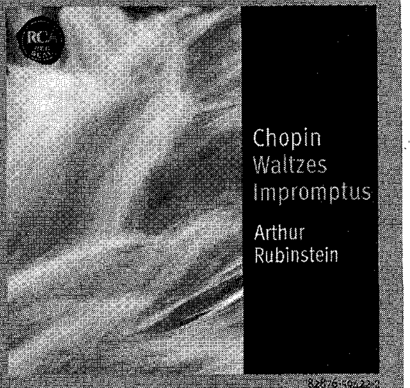

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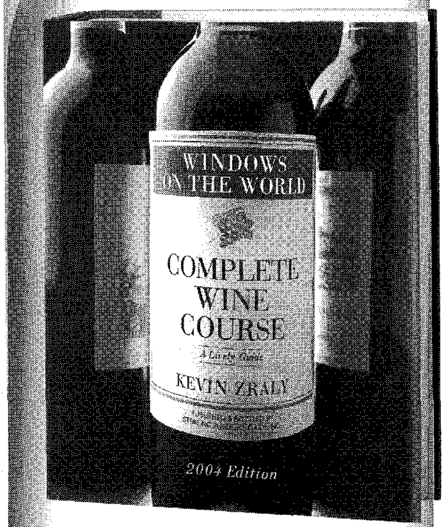

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having an aging actress recall her bit part in an imaginary Stooges short, one in which "the boys are sent to death row and are executed. . . . It was sad for the Three Stooges, what with the dead baby and the Stooges being executed and all.") The Farrellys were comfortable with characters who learned nothing—they had successfully fought with studio executives to keep Carrey and Daniels from accepting a ride on a bus full of young women in bikinis in the final scene of "Dumb & Dumber." (They promised to shoot it both ways but then pretended that fading light had prevented them from filming the actors getting onto the bus.) The greater difficulty was that the Stooges live in a world without consequences, in a perpetual present tense. To give them a quest even at the level of Jim Carrey's in "Dumb & Dumber" was to risk giving them dignity—and dignity could corrode them.

Bobby Farrelly was probably less anxious about this challenge than Peter. "Plots are for pussies," Bobby likes to say. He told me, "The last couple of films, as we were making them, we were thinking, It's got a nice message. But originally we never thought about that stuff—to me, it gets in the way of being real funny. Who goes to see 'Dumb & Dumber' for the plot?" He later added, "I love it when you have people flat out laughing their ass off. I'd rather do that than have the audience go 'Awwww.' People were coming out of 'Mary' saying they'd pissed their pants. That's it right there. Any time when you can make someone involuntarily piss, your life is better for it." But he also knew how numbing a Stooges TV marathon could be; he saw the need for some "heart or backstory. Just to fill in the gaps, so you can put up with the hitting."

Why is Moe so angry? The question may never have been asked, but the Farrellys tentatively began to answer it. They worked for weeks on an opening that showed the Stooges on death row, telling their story to a priest. (The movie would have continued in flashback, before eventually returning to the jail, to show the Stooges as prison guards who, by telling their story, have just squandered the final hours of the priest, who has been sentenced to die.) They cut this, and began instead with a

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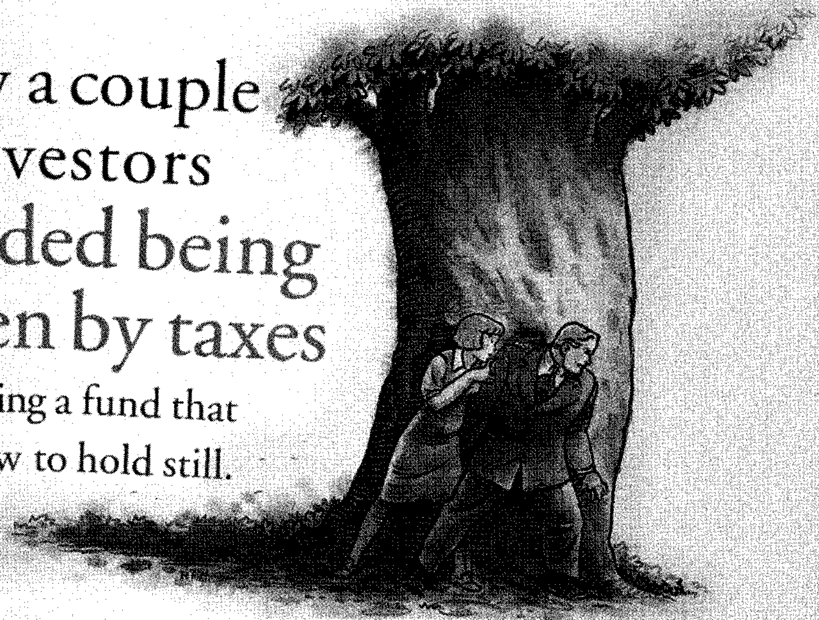

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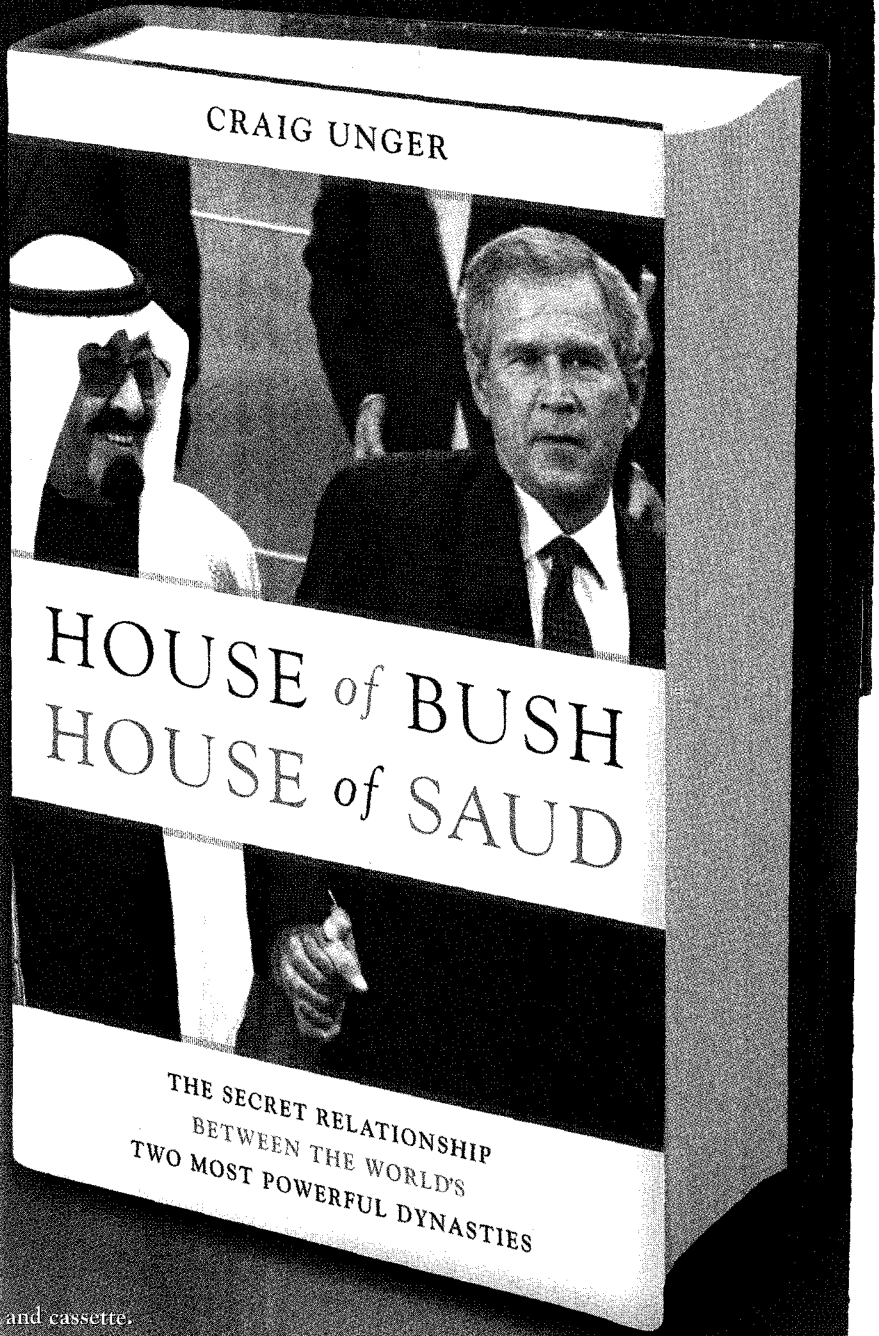
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laundry bag thrown from a moving DeSoto; it lands on the steps of a drab brick building. A nun crouches and peers into the bag. Then—*doink!*—a baby's arm reaches out and pokes her in the eye. "When we came up with the orphanage, it seemed a real good fit," Bobby recalled. "We decided that Moe's anger has to do with the fact that the three of them were put in an orphanage and Moe had a chance to go out and make it on his own, but he thought, I can't leave these knuckleheads behind. He comes back and he feels that he gave up everything to stay and be the leader of these Stooges—because as bad as they are with him, in his eyes they're sunk without him." (The Farrellys always planned to use the original lineup of Moe, Larry, and Curly, although there may be room for Shemp in a sequel.)

In the Farrellys' emerging scenario, the Stooges leave the orphanage as adults, they split up, and they find that in the outside world the rules of violence are different. (Moe slaps a man who cries out, "What, are you crazy? That's assault!" Moe responds, "Well, here's your pepper," and he does it again.) The brothers moved slowly, keeping within the bounds of a PG-13 rating but allowing themselves to go beyond the usual range of the Three Stooges, who never before squeezed babies to make them urinate. Peter told me that there were loud disagreements about a scene at the end of the script involving balloons: "The image of them farting into a balloon—that cracked me up. Bobby was saying, 'I think this is beneath us.' I didn't. I think he was just burned out on slapstick." (It was an unexpected argument, given that Bobby has been known to say that "a fart is the one thing that is funny in every language" and had suggested to me that "they could use a bit of that in 'The Passion of the Christ.' ")

The balloon scene remained, but, for fear of causing harm to children, other gags were taken out, including a scene in which Larry falls asleep in the bath and Moe wakes him by throwing in a radio. "And Larry comes up, hair all like this"—describing the scene, Peter held his hands wide apart, and he mimicked Larry Fine's voice—" 'What are you doing, Moe?' Well, it occurred to us that some kid will do that, thinking it's funny. We had to cut it." (They also de-

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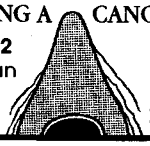

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cided to defuse the violence by showing, during the end credits, the plasticity of apparently hard objects used as weapons in the movie.)

The first draft took seven months, longer than any of their previous scripts. "At the end, we were fried—*fried*," Peter said, and although they were happy with the first and second acts, they were troubled by the end. Some emotional tug was missing, some Stooge-like substitute for Diaz or Paltrow. As it stood, the script had the Stooges trying to save their orphanage from closing, "but that's a little vague," Peter said. "There's some funny shit, but we've got to find a through-line, a thread that's going to get you to the end, have people stay in their seats. We have to crack that."

If one can leave aside the billion dollars that their films have earned, it's possible to think of the Farrellys as industry outsiders. Jeff Daniels has compared them to "lottery winners cut loose in Hollywood." They are easy, open company. Both are married to women they knew before they were rich; they fill their films with friends from home. On a recent long drive through the Rockies with the Farrellys and Mike Cerrone, the conversation was about Rhode Island school friends who had died in freak accidents or lived lives of spectacular deceit; about the comparative virtues of bathrooms in roadside hotel chains ("Holiday Inn, maybe, but Holiday Inn Express? I don't need the pressure," Peter said); and about the casting for "The Three Stooges," which is likely to have a budget of between fifty and seventy million dollars.

"Until Russell Crowe says no, we can't go to anybody else," Bobby said, and the others agreed. Peter and the Farrellys' longtime producer, Bradley Thomas, had recently met with Crowe in Sydney. "He's the best actor working today," Peter told me, "and he's got a bit of a chip on his shoulder, and a block-nosed Moe look. All you have to do is put prosthetic bags under his eyes and give him a haircut." Crowe initially said that he was not interested; then they had a big night out that ended at Crowe's apartment in the early hours, and when Peter got up to leave, at 5 A.M., to appear for an interview on Australian morning television, Crowe called him a "despicable pussy" for breaking up the party. But Crowe did say, "Send me the stupid script." When Crowe later spoke with him, Peter said, "He said he laughed his ass off but didn't like the ending. So now we're going to send him the new draft."

"The Three Stooges" is due to start shooting in mid-October, and you can hear in Bradley Thomas's voice an urgency about settling on a cast. "If you do this, you're a Stooge," he said. "You can't just turn up and be an actor. If you're going to be Curly, you've got to learn how to be Curly." Bobby added, "They are going to have to spend a few weeks together, learning how to slap each other. Nobody has done this since the Stooges." He knows of no specialists to hire. "It's not like there's a bunch of guys some-

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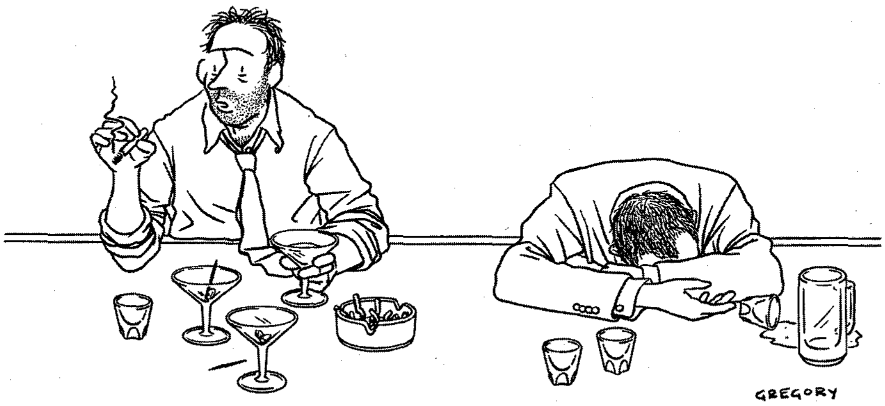
where still poking each other in the eye. We're just going to have to slow the films down and study how they did it."

If the Farrellys still sounded relaxed, "it's because we have a Zen approach to casting," Peter said. "Here's the thing. If you get everything you want, then it's going to be as good as you wanted it, but if you don't get what you want, then it could be better. If I think of all the women I might have married before I met my wife . . ." He said that Jim Carrey was "our two-hundredth choice" for "Dumb & Dumber"; Ben Stiller was their eighth for "There's Something About Mary."

Warner Bros. has asked the Farrellys to choose a Moe before they cast the others. The Three Stooges were short men, and will appear short in this film. ("If they look bigger, then the hitting is 'The Sopranos,' " Peter said.) It will be easy to cast very tall actors around fairly tall actors like Russell Crowe, but it would be best if the Stooges were all the same height. "If Russell doesn't want it, then we should go straight back to Benicio," Peter said from the passenger seat; the Farrellys had spoken with Benicio Del Toro, but Warner Bros. had balked at his asking price. "That could still work—Benicio . . . and Sean Penn as Larry." The Farrellys have envisioned other casting scenarios. Peter later told me, "I've asked Larry David to play Larry maybe twenty-five times. He whines, 'I don't want to leave my family.' Now I talk to him as if he's in. It gives him a little panic each time." The Farrellys have also entertained the idea of Mel Gibson as Moe—Gibson is an admirer of the Stooges, and was the executive producer of a Stooges bio-pic in 2000. "He's a good actor, and he could use a movie like this, just for his own health," Bobby said. "Just do a dumb comedy."

"Look at those colors," Peter said as we drove across high desert: tumbleweed, distant mountains. "*Pfff,*" Cerrone said, in mock disdain. Bobby, in the voice of Moe, said, "Ya like colors? How about black and blue?" Peter initiated a simple game: naming a type of vegetable, in turn, until none were left. This lasted for a hundred miles, and involved controversies about rhubarb and tomatoes, and ended when Cerrone was caught reading the back of a vegetable-soup can at a gas station. Reviving a form of schoolroom torture, Peter now and then grabbed at his fellow-passengers at a point just above the knee and held the leg for a moment in a crushing grip. When CDs were played, he mimed along to songs with the wrong instrument—violin for guitar, flute for piano—following an old family joke that has found its way into the script of "The Three Stooges." At one point, Cerrone performed a favorite party gag: a five-minute impression of someone using a vibrator.

Late that night, still beset with anxiety about the risks of an hour and a half of slapstick, Bobby and Cerrone had a breakthrough: What if they split "The Three Stooges" into four episodes? The



"Boy, I'm going to pay for this tomorrow at yoga class."

• •

script would still tell the same story, but each of its acts would almost stand alone, at the approximate length of a Stooges short. The movie would fade to black, then fade up again, with Stooges theme music and a new title. The audience would get its bearings—and a sense that slapstick had been contained in its proper length. The Farrellys and Cerrone discussed this over breakfast the next morning. "I tell you the truth, I think it's a really smart idea," Peter said. "You know, this may interest Russell Crowe." He added that he had already thought of a title for the first episode: "More Orphan Than Not."

Every morning in Sun Valley, the Farrellys and Cerrone went to the gym and ate a late breakfast. Then, in Peter's room, they would begin a four- or five-hour conversation that covered, for example, whether "orphanage," when spoken by the Stooges, was spelled "oiphanage" or "oyphanage," and whether Curly's trademark chuckle could follow an accidental pun. ("No, 'nyuk, nyuk, nyuk' is only when he knows he's kidding," Peter ruled.) A new draft began to appear, incorporating the episodic structure—"How about this for the second title: 'Cocks and Balls'?" Peter suggested. "It fades up, and they're kicking a soccer ball and there's a chicken around. And then it just goes on." The others laughed.

In an afternoon session, Bobby said, "The scene we don't have is where they sit down at some dinner table with fancier people."

"We have a party at the end," Peter replied, adding, "I don't like the dinner-table bit. The Stooges did it to death; it's kind of hard to beat it." He paused. "One thing we don't have here is the ultimate hit fest. Where it's *whoosh, ding, bong, bing*"—he was miming punches. "And then, when you think it's all over, there are a couple more. *Boom, dong, bing, whoosh.* It's always funnier the further it goes. Those last two kill you. You think it's over and then you get a *whoosh, boom.* We've got a lot of hitting but not one set that goes beyond normal. We need one real long one."

Mike Cerrone began miming, too: "It goes, you know, *bang,* then *whoosh, whoosh*—right?—and then he goes *whoosh.* 'Hey! What's the big idea?' " Cerrone, who is a talented Stooges mimic, a sometime actor in Farrelly films, and a possible Curly in the movie, demonstrated Moe grabbing at Larry's hair, then trying to do the same with Curly, who has none. He had Moe looking at his empty hand.

"You know, you could do one where he puts his hand down Curly's pants," Peter said. He stood up, and mimed Moe grabbing some pubic hair inside Curly's pants, and then, with a crunching sound, pulling it up: "*Yeaww!*"

They laughed at this perfect synthesis of Farrelly and Stooge.

"*Yeaooooow!*" Bobby said, holding an imaginary fistful of hair. "You could have a bird flying out of it . . ."

"Yes, it's a little nest with birds in it," said Cerrone, fluttering his wings.

"Yeah, there you go!" Peter said, in the tone of a man who has done a good day's work. "There you go." ♦

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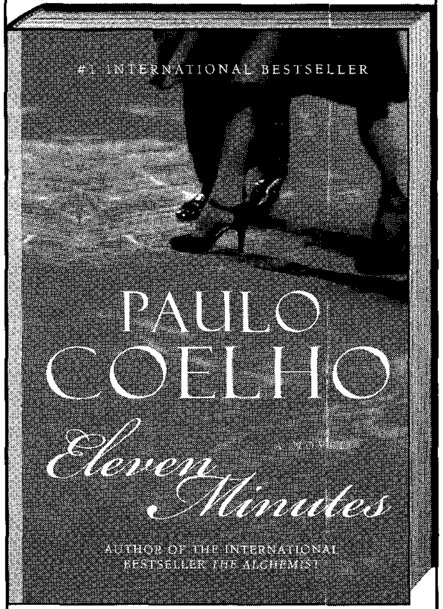
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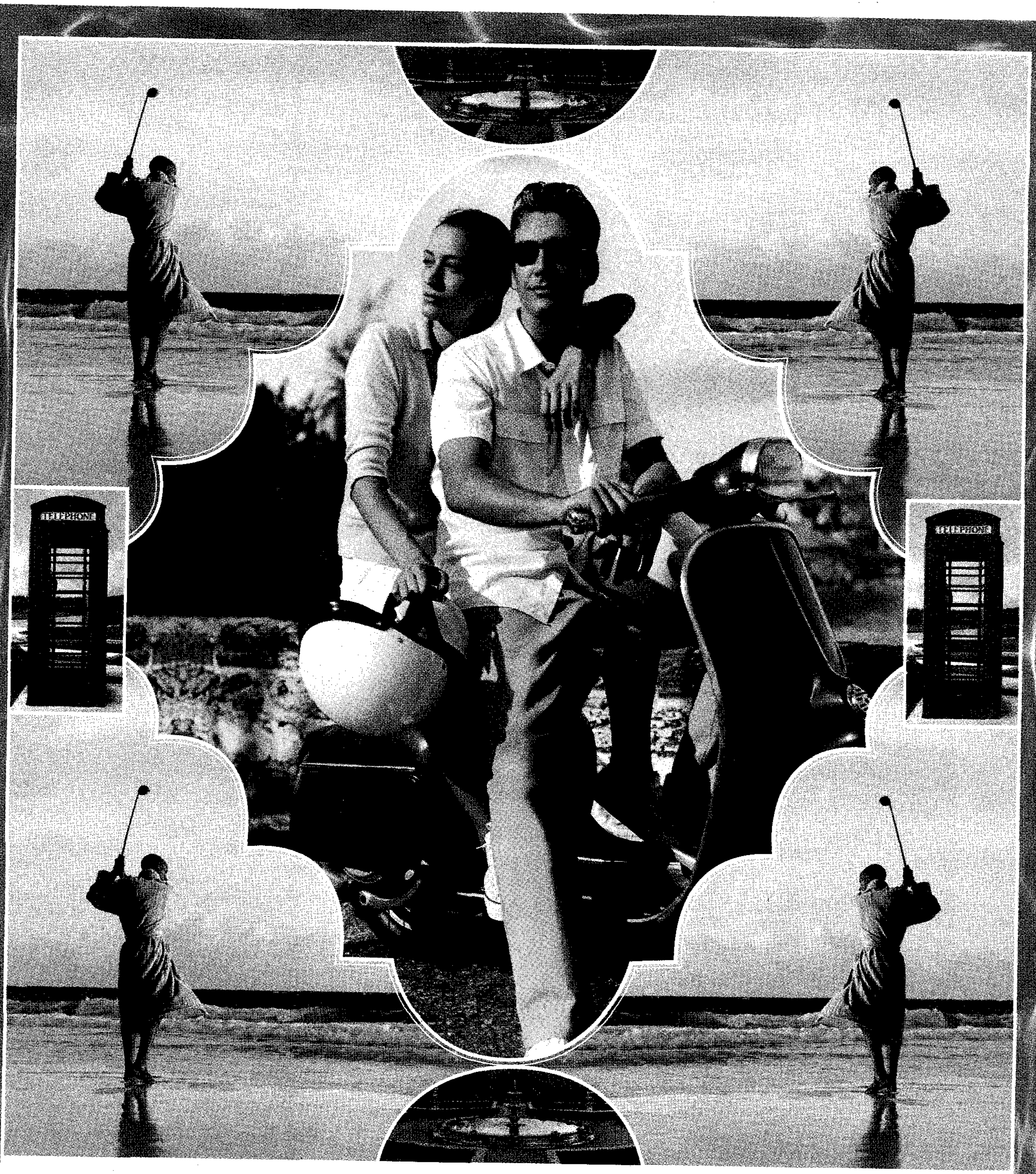

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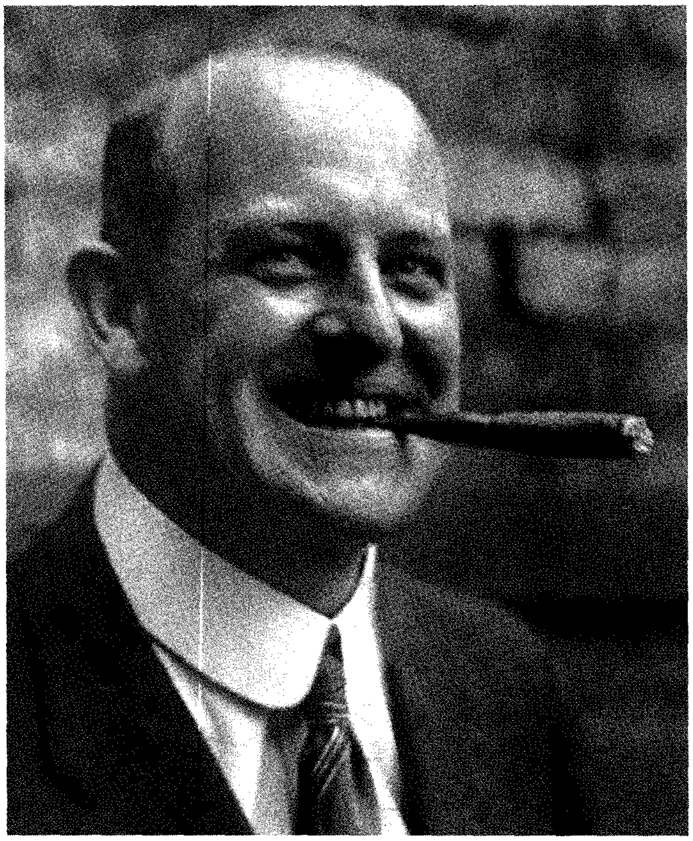
LIFE AND LETTERS

BEYOND A JOKE

The perils of loving P. G. Wodehouse.

BY ANTHONY LANE



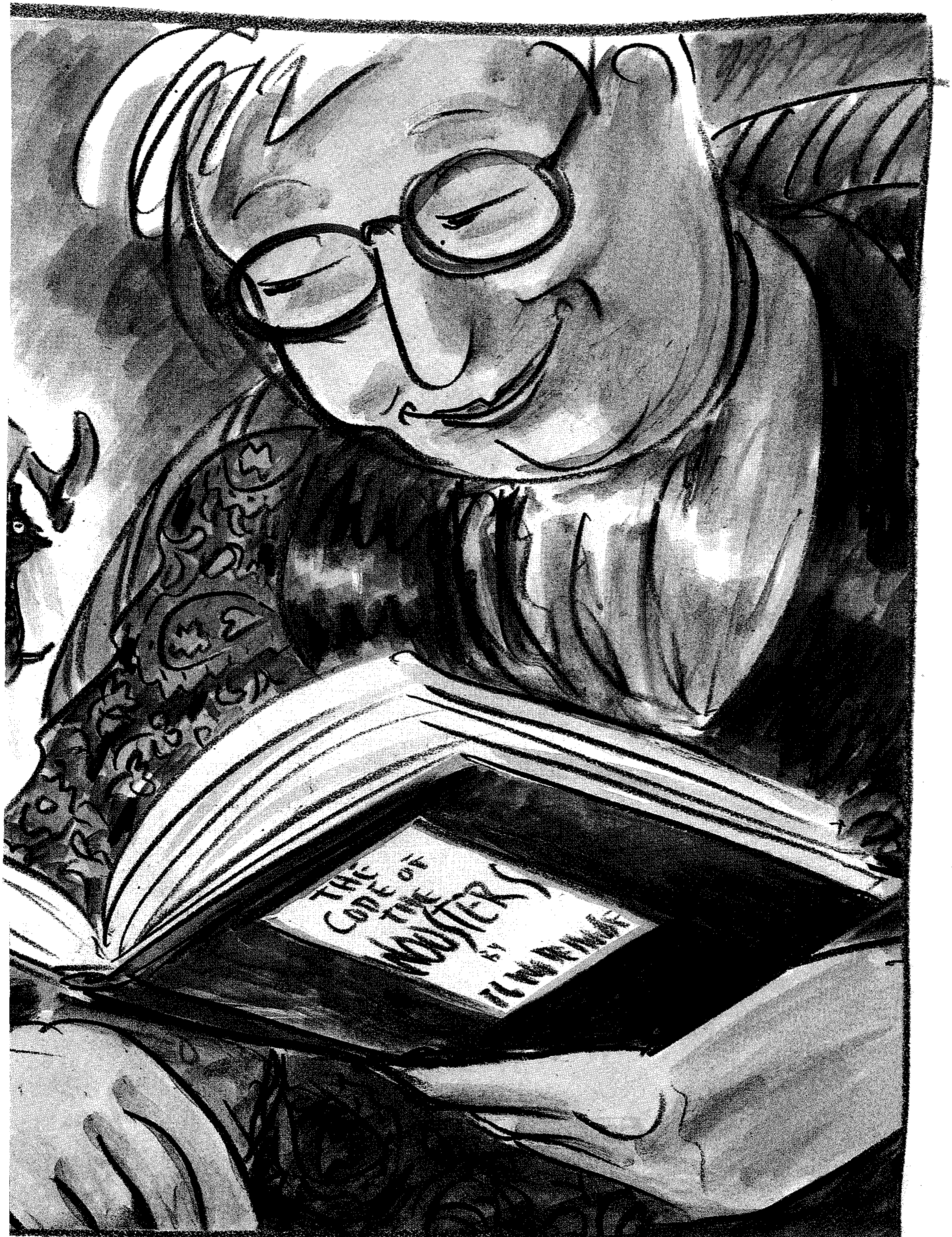
His name was Eric Vachell, except that it wasn't. He was known to me as Uncle Eric, but he was not my uncle. He was born an Anglican and died a Roman Catholic. He never married, because of something he had read in a book. He was a doctor who was laid low by the suffering that he witnessed. He was never famous, and his existence is now recalled by fewer than a dozen people in the world. More than twenty-five years after his death, however, he is still a pervasive influence on my life. And here's the strangest thing: I never met him.

Even that is not quite true. I did meet Eric, but only at my christening, when I was not yet fit for human society. He was present that day, attending what was, by any standard, a minor event in the social calendar, because he was my great-uncle—the brother of my maternal grandfather. I was wearing diapers at the time, and was therefore ill-equipped to engage Eric in discussion of his favored topics, such as Catholic doctrine and herbaceous borders. Even now, though, I wonder whether he did not lean over my crib and confer some murmured blessing: a hint of the link that would bind us.

That was our final encounter. I never saw him again—it was tacitly understood that Eric's preference was for children of the unseen variety—and we never spoke on the telephone. Eric, born in 1897, hailed from a generation that mistrusted the phone and put its faith in letter-writing. According to my late mother, his niece, all his letters began with the phrase "The weather is not clement in Hove." This was unsurprising, Hove being a small town on the south coast of England to which, by tradition, the elderly have retired, there to stagger through tempests of ozone-rich breeze. Although

EVERETT COLLECTION; RIGHT: EDWARD SOREL

Immerse yourself in Wodehouse for a while


THE CODE OF THE WOOSTERS
BY

start to subscribe, whether you like it or not, to his sneaky inversion of accepted social values. Opposite: Wodehouse around 1917.

Uncle Eric lived not far from my boarding school, he never visited me there, preferring, wisely, to correspond. I have a distant recollection of tearing open an envelope from him and seeing a couple of stamps flutter to the ground. Without hesitation, I swapped them for a Sherbet Fountain—a tube of sweet powder into which one dipped a rod of licorice, winding up with a fevered mouthful of gray fizz. This struck me as a phenomenal bargain. It was only after my great-uncle died, when I was sixteen, that doubts began to stir. His stamp collection, which he had always kept under his bed, was valued at thirty thousand pounds. It is quite conceivable that, as a means of outwitting inheritance tax, he had passed on some of his prime specimens—mint Mauritian rarities, say, or one-off Victorian freaks with the Queen's head printed upside down—to an uncomprehending great-nephew. I could have dined on sherbet for the rest of my natural life.

Other treasures from Uncle Eric's household met with a kinder fate. There was the small ivory Buddha whose yellowing glaze and otherworldly leer caused my mother to aim him at the wastepaper basket, pause, then offer him to a firm of antique dealers, who twittered with joy and offered eight hundred pounds in return. And the moral is: Never throw gods away. There was a dressing gown of dark-red silk that I thought made me look like Noël Coward but which suggested to others a mildewed necrophile of reduced means. There was a heavy, unlovable wing armchair that reeked of an earlier century, right down to the rapacious ball-and-claw of its mahogany feet; the velvet that covered it was of precisely the same hue as the robe, so that when I wore one item of Eric's legacy to sit in another I could, in effect, disappear, leaving only a disembodied head to bob on a burgundy sea.

My great-uncle was tidiness incarnate. For many years, he won a local award for Best-Kept Small Garden, and, after he died, we inherited a large bundle of his personal papers, pruned with equal care. These include many letters from him to his Aunt Adela, which I presume he reclaimed after she died. That is in itself a peculiar practice; to hoard your own correspondence argues not so much vanity as a rage for order—a wish to keep your cards, including any jokers, close to your chest. Uncle Eric was born John George Eric Koelle, a Germanic name that was pronounced "Kelly" on the English side of the family; it rang dangerously foreign in English ears, and in 1922 he changed it, but there is nothing in his papers about this momentous switch. What he did leave, as though anticipating a future audience, was a four-page typewritten curriculum vitae, plus an appended list of "Narrow Escapes." Here are the highlights:

1917. Commissioned as 2/Lieut. in R.A. [Royal Artillery]

1918. Posted overseas to Palestine. Took part in Allenby's great offensive, which routed the Turks and was the beginning of the end of the First World War.

1919. Went up to Cambridge and started Medicine. Good shooting.

1925. Returned to Army as Regular Officer in R.A.M.C. [Royal Army Medical Corps]

1926. Sailed for India. Many varied stations and experiences, including N.W. Frontier. Delhi Military Hospital 2 1/2 years (one year in Delhi fort)—(very *hot!*) Three accidents in my baby Austin car—each could have been fatal—one my fault (alcohol).

1931. Home (Feb. very *cold!*).

1937. To Singapore as Skin Specialist. Busy V.D. practice; but contrived also to be M.C. of St Andrew's C. of E. Cathedral; and, in addition, ran a parish in the suburbs and preached every Sunday for 2 years!

1942. Sailed by "Cathay" in the great N. African landings. On arrival at Bougie, Algeria, ship was bombed heavily, and *sunk*, losing all my hospital equipment.

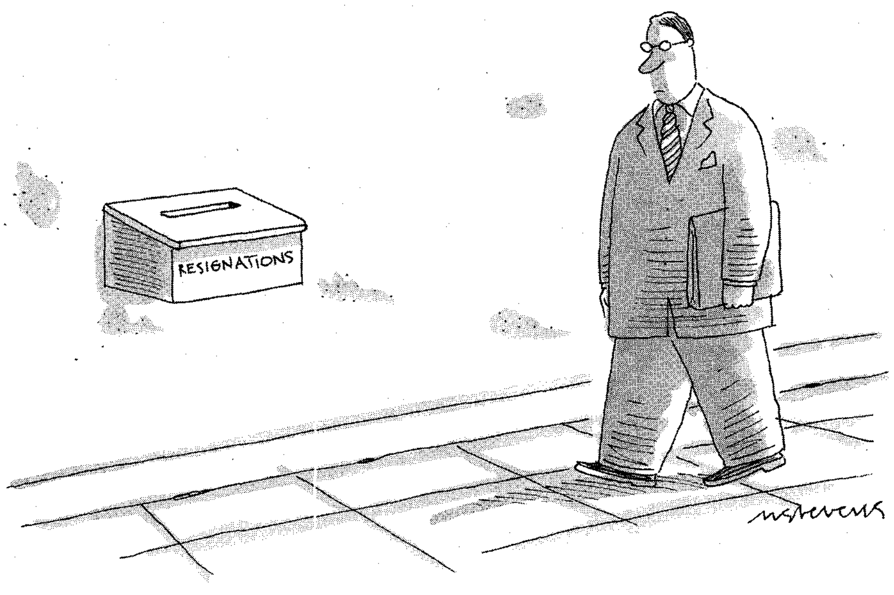
1943. A series of battles, and distressing experiences, with heavy casualties and sickness. In action when I was holding 800 wounded (normal capacity, 400). "Mentioned in Dispatches." [A British military award for operational service] Broke down in health and was posted to India. Before leaving, was received into the Catholic Church in Sousse, Tunisia. [added in ink] My father died in September.

1944. Arrived in Bombay. In December, went to command the large Italian Prisoners-of-War Hospital in Yol, on slopes of Himalayas.

1946. Ordered home at last.

1950. Decided to retire! Since then, PEACE, D.G.!! [Deo gratias]; but it took me 10 years to recover fully from the strain of war.

1971. Subsided into the quiet life, aged 75.



It was a subsidence that he had earned. Eric's *résumé* has all the clipped wryness that would be expected from an Englishman of his generation, but there are more unusual gestures, too, toward a history of private suffering, and toward palliatives both trivial and profound. Shooting and climbing were standard pursuits of the British Empire, and at times in his letters home he appears to be reporting not just from another country but from the vales and mists of a barely credible age, as when he writes from the Srinagar Club, in Kashmir, "I found, on arrival, that my houseboat was ready, & was a very fine one, consisting of six rooms, & a boatman, cook and sweeper, and of course my servant, Sankar. . . . The other day, the Maharajah celebrated his birthday, & rowed down the river in golden barges."

That Cleopatran echo comes from 1926. In the ensuing twenty years, much of the gold rubbed away, and the Eric Vachell who retired in 1950 had collided with more brutish and calamitous patches of experience than, even as a doctor, he cared to contemplate. The remainder of his life was a rebuke to that chaos. He had the True Church; he had his stamps; he had my mother, his devoted niece, who, on her visits, would never stay with him but check into a nearby hotel, where he would join her for a feast of brown soup and cutlets; and he had his rocks. Whenever Eric went climbing, he would return with a suitcase full of geological samples. On subsequent expeditions, he would bear with him as much of this collection as was physically manageable, in a gasping attempt to avoid replication of his finds: a Sisyphean task that reminds me of Molloy, the character in Samuel Beckett who repeatedly removes a stone from his pants or jacket, sucks it for a while, then transfers it to another pocket.

There were two further items in Uncle Eric's legacy. One was a voluminous study of Charles Dickens, by Eric Vachell. He toiled on it for years, and I wish I could suggest that it was worth his labor. Instead, it is little more than a dogged march through the novels; my mother gave it to the Dickens Fellowship, in London, where a curator informed me that the typescript was "of no conceivable scholarly interest." More worthy of scrutiny was the final gift. Uncle Eric left me his madness. This was not congenital, for nobody on either side of the family has suffered it before or since. Although my parents took possession of it, I appointed myself the sole beneficiary. Like his red armchair, the madness resides in this room as I write: not all of it, but enough to keep sanity at bay. I can see it squatting there, on the windowsill, in twenty-three volumes. Each of them bears the name of P. G. Wodehouse.

It is hard to know where to start. Logic tells me that there must be people on this planet who do not know who Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright is, or the meaning of the heliotrope pajamas with the old gold stripe, or what Lady Sprockett-Sprockett drank in the drawing room when Mordred Mulliner was hiding on a high-backed sofa, or even why Rupert Baxter deserved to be shot in the seat of the pants; but logic and I have nothing to say to one another. The thought of not reading Wodehouse strikes me as no less indecent, and in some ways no less impractical, than walking down Madison Avenue wearing only a pair of loafers.

There are very few compelling reasons to be glad that one was born in the twentieth century, and most of them are curative: heart transplants, the polio vaccine, the look on Grace Kelly's face. Then, there is Wodehouse. Christians have traditionally pitied those good Romans who lived before the birth of Christ, and, in the same spirit, I feel sorry for those late Victorians who died just too early to read Wodehouse, whose first novel, "The Pothunters," came out in 1902. Pelham Grenville Wodehouse himself was born in 1881, and, given the timeless kick of his jokes, it is tempting to forget just how securely he was rooted in his age. His childhood, especially, strikes us now as a parody of disconnection: at the age of two, he was brought home from Hong Kong, where his father was a magistrate, and placed in the care of a nanny. Between the ages of three and fifteen, he barely saw his parents. And this was a boy who grew up to report, "My father was as normal as rice pudding. My childhood went like a breeze from start to finish." It should be added that, in the colonial era of English rule, such upbringings were by no means uncommon, and what mattered to Wodehouse was not the abandonment but the tough hide that one was forced to grow in order to cope with it. Men without parents sought consolation in their schools and clubs, whose regimes felt more calmative than oppressive, and whose opportunities for friendship took the place of love. This was acutely the case for Wodehouse, whose adulation of Dulwich College, his private school in South London, was so abiding that, even in old age, he was as gripped by the latest rugby and cricket results from his alma mater as by anything else in the world.

Wodehouse did not go to university, his father lacking the funds to support him, so he toiled briefly at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, in London, before becoming a full-time writer—a position that he filled assiduously to the day of his death, in 1975, when the unfinished manuscript of his last novel, "Sunset at Blandings," was found beside him. He owned more Pekinese dogs than is healthy for any man. He had a long and happy, or at least happily structured, marriage, and a stepdaughter whom he adopted as his own. In the last weeks of his life, he became a knight. He mastered not just the comic novel but the light musical lyric, writing hundreds of songs for nearly forty shows, teaming up with, among others, Ira Gershwin and, most felicitously, Jerome Kern. You could argue that Wodehouse did more than any other writer to soothe the citizens of a harried century.

Uncle Eric was far from alone, then, in relying on Wodehouse for amusement; it is the intensity of that reliance that sets him apart. Except for his forays into Dickens, he read almost nothing but Wodehouse. Even I regard that as too militant a diet, preferring to read my Wodehouse not as a substitute for great literature but as an addendum to it. Better still, I use Wodehouse as an excuse for not reading new literature. This is my shameful record of the past decade: no victors from the ranks of the National Book Awards, no Books-of-the-Month, no manly historical biographies in one or many volumes, no rage against mortality from a novelist who has lost none of his power to shock, no mouthwatering vignettes from an Umbrian farmstead, no piercing first novel that has been pinned to the *Times* best-seller list for ninety-two weeks, no shuddering recollections of abuse (true or false), no work that has changed people's lives or touched their hearts or introduced them to a China that they never knew existed.

On the other hand, I *have* read "Pearls, Girls, and Monty Bodkin." I have read "Uncle Dynamite" and "Aunts Aren't Gentlemen." I have paid extra attention to Wodehouse's golfing stories (which I thought would be a closed book to non-golfers, whereas they are in fact open to anybody with a keen sense of the ridiculous; namely, non-golfers). I have whittled down the Wodehouse corpus to a hard core of around twenty-three books, dating from 1919 ("My Man Jeeves") to 1949 ("The Mating Season"), and from those I doubt whether I shall stray. Above all, I have pledged my allegiance to Uncle Fred, or, to do him the honor of his full title, Frederick Altamont Cornwallis Twistleton, fifth Earl of Ickenham, and the hero of much high-octane Wodehouse. Unlike Uncle Eric, he is no relation of mine—a good thing, too, judging by the experience of his nephew Pongo Twistleton-Twistleton, who suffers from the presence of Lord Ickenham as other men are plagued by lumbago.

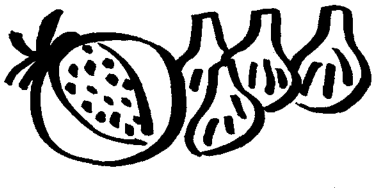
There is one short story, "Uncle Fred Flits By," that I try not to study in depth more than once a fortnight. It relates the occasion on which His Lordship, finding himself at an ominously loose end, brings an afternoon of Old Testament havoc down upon an unassuming London suburb, or, as he himself says, "I look about me, even in a foul hole like Mitching Hill, and I ask myself—How can I leave this foul hole a better and happier foul hole than I found it?" To claim that you have read a story more than two hundred times may sound willful, but only if you treat the custom as a literary one; in fact, it is more like seeing a close friend, or visiting a favorite bar. The only texts that I know by heart, as I know stretches of Wodehouse, are the hymns and liturgies that I learned in my youth, and I am resigned to the likelihood that, in my mumbling dotage, I may start to confuse the two, asking on my knees for absolution from Almighty Fred. If so, it will be a pardonable mistake, given that the effect of "Uncle Fred Flits By" is to remind the reader that, with a bit of wrangling, there can still be times when all's right with the world—a sort of memento vivae.

Most fixations seem predestined, and this one was no exception. Once my home had been lined with Wodehouse, there was no escape. The effect on me has been chronic (the rest of my family reports only mild symptoms), but one shouldn't moan, first, because Wodehouse is the funniest writer—that is, the most resourceful and unflagging deliverer of fun—that the human race, a glum crowd, has yet produced, and, second, because one's fellow-sufferers make such beguiling company. Evelyn Waugh was a fan of P. G. Wodehouse. George Orwell was a fan. T. S. Eliot was a fan. Tony Blair once declared himself a fan, although he keeps quiet about it these days, perhaps for fear of sounding like a toff. Wandering scholars report that the most fervent Wodehouseans are to be found in India, where the courteously charged language of Bertie Wooster can still be heard on ordinary lips. My single most deranged possession has to be a six-volume set entirely devoted to translations of one Wodehouse short story, "The Great Sermon Handicap." It is offered in fifty-eight different languages and dialects, ranging from Coptic and Icelandic ("*'Gamli, góði Bertie!' sagði Claude*") to Basque, French Creole, Somali, Latin ("*Bingo, 'Jaevio enim' inquit, 'animus aleandi non inest'* "), Sanskrit, Yiddish, Middle High German, and, with complete assurance, Chaucerian English: "*'Al hayl, Bertkin,' he answerede with drery and distract visage.*"

The weirdness of such a project will be apparent to all save those who have actually read "The Great Sermon Handicap." This is one of the central texts of the Master's achievement, its surface lovingly polished to reveal the deep grain of its pleasures. The story finds Bertie Wooster, his unperturbable manservant, Jeeves, his pal Bingo Little, and his intemperate cousins Claude and Eustace repairing to the country and betting on which of ten vicars, in the surrounding parishes, will deliver the longest sermon on a given Sunday. The winner, by a nose, is the Reverend James Bates, a rank outsider at 100 to 8, who storms home with forty-five solid minutes on Brotherly Love, including "a rather exhaustive excursus into the family life of the early Assyrians." Bertie and company come to grief. Jeeves alone cleans up, having murky access to an inside tip.

Wodehouse was a kindly but not a godly figure, and his religious beliefs, such as they were, would have been construed as vague even by the comically tolerant standards of the Church of England. But it was the comedy that he loved, and he may have recognized in that encrusted institution, with its snoozing benignity, a kindred spirit. "The Great Sermon Handicap" has the nerve—mischievous rather than blasphemous, for Wodehouse was Jeevesian in his immunity to bad taste—to conjure up a paradise of communal belief and then whip it along with the rackety buzz of a racetrack.

"The Great Sermon Handicap" is in my copy of "The Jeeves Omnibus," a battered brick of almost eight hundred and fifty pages. I have frequently travelled with it, hanging on to Wodehouse's words with the neediness of a child. It saved me on a train ride through Yugoslavia, in 1981; on the bunks below me lay five snickering brigands, who had cheerfully smuggled coffee and stockings from Austria, and who kept inviting me down from my upper berth for a cup of something viscous. An acquaintance of mine had fallen for this trick on an earlier journey and had woken up beside the track on the outskirts of Thessaloníki, in full possession of his underwear but not much else, so I fended off these blandishments by lying very still in the half-dark, nose against the ceiling, and reading "Jeeves and the Impending Doom." Since then, I have consulted the "Omnibus" on a daily basis, and I fully intend to be buried with it, so that I can relieve my drab eternity by savoring any nuances in the prose that I might have overlooked.



It belonged, like the rest of my collection, to Uncle Eric, and his signature is there on the flyleaf to prove it. P. G. Wodehouse wrote ninety-two works of fiction and three volumes of well-massaged memoir, and Eric Vachell had two complete sets, one upstairs, one downstairs, so that, should he want to consult them, *he did not have to change floors*. Some people have televisions in every room; most families keep aspirin in the kitchen as well as the bathroom. With similar foresight, Eric insured that, should the craving for "Bingo and the Peke Crisis" strike at an unaccustomed hour, he could reach out a hand and supply the essential dose. If anything, I now regard his arrangement—a mature response to the demands of the average Wodehouse reader—as a little undernourished. Place a copy of "Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend," say, in every drawer of every desk in every house in the land, just as the Gideons supply Bibles to hotel rooms, and national morale would fly through the roof.

Many of Eric's volumes of Wodehouse are first editions, implying not that he was a rare-books junkie but that he bought them as they came out. They have long since been stripped of their jackets, and most are so heavily foxed that they may at some point have been dragged along by hounds. In short, they are well read. That may be anathema to a bibliophile, in whose view the opening and fingering of any book is a disgusting habit and a menace to society, but for the Wodehousean the furred and spotted pages of Eric's collection reek, quite properly, of love. If my first edition of "Eggs, Beans and Crumpets," published by Herbert Jenkins in 1940, has lost its spine, that is a tribute to the taste of my great-uncle, who understood not just the indispensable status of the work but, with a firm grip, the work itself.

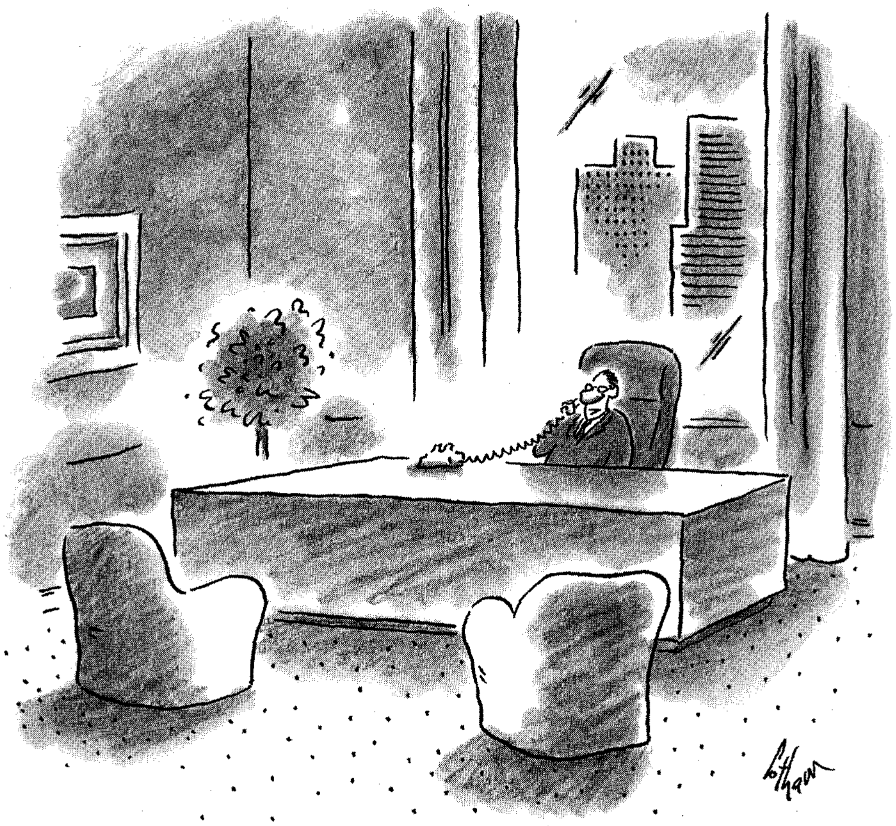
It is a volume of nine stories, some of them starring members of the Drones Club, that fictional—or, rather, mythical—gentlemen's watering hole on Dover Street, in Mayfair, where Wodehouse's imagination tended to slip its leash and run amok. The same holds true for the conduct of the club's members, some of whom, such as Bingo Little, Oofy Prosser, Freddie Widgeon, and Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps, we know by name. Others are generic wastrels ("A Bean was showing his sore leg to some Eggs and Piefaces in the smoking-room of the Drones Club, when a Crumpet came in"). By 1940, the Wodehouse style had ripened to the point where the bough of every sentence was thick with fruit, all but sagging beneath the weight of slang, mock formality, and newly grafted metaphor:

> Bingo, you see, is not a man who finds it easy to float a really substantial loan. People know too much about his financial outlook. He will have it in sackfuls some day, of course, but until he realizes on his Uncle Wilberforce—who is eighty-six and may quite easily go to par—the wolf, so far as he is concerned, will always be in or about the vestibule. The public is aware of this, and it makes the market sluggish.

You need to go back as far as the Ben Jonson of "Volpone" to find such complex, effervescent homage being paid to the comedy of cash. The Wodehouse who worked in a bank had come away with a stash of financial lingo. Hence the exquisite turn of that final phrase ("it makes the market sluggish"), where Bingo's ability to borrow twenty pounds—which is all that we are talking about here—is reported as sternly as some vast, subterranean shift in the stock market. Notice, too, that there is no antecedent for the "it" of "have it in sackfuls"; money, in these pages, is invariably "it" or "the stuff," as if it were a subatomic particle from which all life is formed. As for that vestibule, well, we treat clichés as the dead bodies of the language, but Wodehouse knew that they were only sleeping, or ailing from overuse, and that, with a pinch and a slap, the drowsiest phrase ("keep the wolf from the door") can be revived.

There may be something ridiculous in unpacking the niceties of a single paragraph by a writer as prolific as Wodehouse, but make no mistake: one is following in the footsteps of the author himself. Any gag that causes readers to bow in reverence will have been worked and reworked with equal fierceness on Wodehouse's part, as proved by the plea that he entered in a disarming appeal to posterity:

> When in due course Charon ferries me across the Styx and everyone is telling everyone else what a rotten writer I was, I hope at least one voice will be heard piping up, "But he did take trouble."



"I'm being kept separate from the general inmate population."

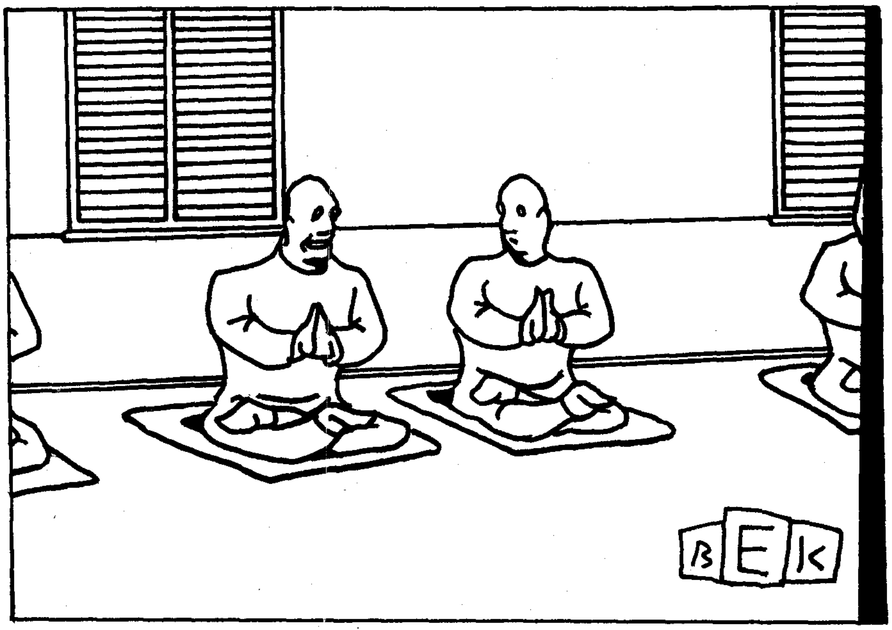
• •

As I made my way through Wodehouse for the first time, in my teens and twenties, I realized that I was not alone. It was like "Journey to the Center of the Earth": however far down I slid into the stories, Eric the pathfinder had already passed that way, leaving cryptic signs upon the walls—or, rather, soft pencil marks upon the pages. They were not meant for me. They were sent by Eric to himself, and they were like grid references, helping him to map the high points of an imaginary country. Thus, when Bertie Wooster admits, "I am never at my best *tête à tête* with the constabulary," Eric writes at the side, "Nor me!," as if he were standing at Bertie's elbow and lending him moral support.

The annotations, at their most basic, demonstrate that Eric would have made a dependable proofreader. The curt bark "Comma!" on page 100 of "Joy in the Morning" makes plain as much. As for the opening line of Chapter XI of "Big Money" ("Prone on the sofa in his palatial apartment on the second floor of Grosvenor House, T. Paterson Frisby lay and stared at the ceiling"), Eric is onto it in a flash: " 'Prone' is lying face downwards!" he exclaims. That prim tone is sustained throughout the novel, which finds Eric the editor slowly transforming into Eric the nanny ("No one seems to see the necessity of dressing gowns!" he writes of a character wearing pajamas). He also liked to know where every character was at any given moment, for below "THE END" he has inscribed, "One presumes the self-confident detective, Susan, made her exit too!"

This close reading can itself be read as pedantry—affectionate, cautious, but within the bounds of reason. At other points, the bounds are overstepped:

> We do not, of course, discuss the matter, for to do so would rather come under the head of speaking lightly of a woman's name, but Jeeves is in full possession of the facts relating to the Bassett-Wooster mix-up and thoroughly cognizant of the peril which threatens me from that quarter. There was no need to explain to him why I now lighted a feverish cigarette and hitched the lower jaw up with a visible effort.



"I pick up most of my wisdom from celebrity interviews."

• •

This comes, as any Jeevesian will tell you, from "The Code of the Woosters," a book as indispensable to the alert mind of the twentieth century as "Anna Karenina" was to that of the late nineteenth. (In the disconcerting words of one of Wodehouse's Russian characters, "P. G. Wodehouse and Tolstoi not bad. Not good, but not bad.") The Bassett-Wooster passage will strike most readers as serviceable rather than dazzling, but Eric was not most readers. What he does is place a slash after the "a" of "speaking," and another one before the second "i" of "visible," then add a note in the margin: "All letters of alphabet (v. rare in so small a limit)."

Well, the man was mad, wasn't he? Either that or he reread Wodehouse until the sentences lost their meaning and dissolved into their smallest constituents. Pencil aloft, Eric sat in his armchair, noticed the "x" in "mix-up" and the "z" in "cognizant," and settled down to his task of utter fruitlessness. (And, may I say, he got it wrong; if one allows the capital "J" of "Jeeves," should the second pencil mark not come after the "q" of "quarter"?) In his tweedy way, Eric was the direct descendant of those medieval monks who labored, without hope of earthly reward, to apply gold leaf to the colophons of an illuminated Bible. Yet, beyond that, his marginalia suggest a desire to enter into conversation with the text—to take issue with it, as if Wodehouse were his interlocutor. What Eric did, in brief, was to live his Wodehouse instead of living life. As I leafed through his exclamations—"V. true," "Quite priceless!!," "As if he could possibly have done!," and, most telling, "No one but a butler would say that!!"—it became obvious that he had long subscribed to the rules, physical and emotional, that govern the Wodehouse universe, that he revelled in the frictionless beauty of the plots that they engendered, and that any slight relaxation of them caused him to wince and frown.

There is one dolorous leitmotif in the passages that prompted Eric's annotations. A few examples will suffice, all singled out by a pencil stroke for his timorous delight:

> Like most men trapped on the telephone by a woman, he had allowed his attention to wander a good deal during the recent monologue. —"Pigs Have Wings."

> Attila the Hun might have broken off his engagement to her [Agnes Flack], but nobody except Attila the Hun, and he only on one of his best mornings.—"A Few Quick Ones."

> A photograph of Mae Belle McGinnis, taken when she was not looking her best because Mr McGinnis had just settled some domestic dispute with the meat-axe.
> —"Young Men in Spats."

What we have here is a prime case not of misogyny, for Eric was constitutionally averse to hatred, but of that more forgivable condition known as gynophobia—a fear of the female sex, and of what dire metamorphoses it might, if left unchecked, wreak on the defenseless male. You hear it everywhere at the Drones Club:

> "How do you account for young Bingo carrying on like this?"
> "Just *joie de vivre*."
> "But he's married."

The question is: Which came first, the Wodehouse or the fear? Was Eric prey to an instinctive prejudice, a shrinkage of body and spirit, for which he sought consolidation in the work of a favored author, or did the men-only saturnalia of the Drones Club get into Eric's system and persuade him to remain a bachelor? And, if the latter, did he not worry that, while some bachelorhoods may be a Woosterish romp ("A fellow makes himself conspicuous when he throws soft-boiled eggs at the electric fan"), others come to resemble a prison term, served in solitary? Whatever the case, Eric never took a wife, and, according to my mother, this decision was made solely on the strength of a passage in P. G. Wodehouse:

> She was definitely the sort of girl who puts her hands over a husband's eyes, as he is crawling in to breakfast with a morning head, and says: "Guess who!"

That comes from "The Code of the Woosters," and it still strikes me, like all the best horror stories, as life-changingly precise. Eric must have thought so, too, because before the word "breakfast" he added the word "Monday."

One can only applaud such minute textual scrutiny. It seems to have been spurred by a determination not merely to worm oneself into a book but somehow to *obey* Wodehouse, as if "The Code of the Woosters" were a moral instruction manual rather than a comic novel—and then to tweak little bits of Wodehouse, forging them anew with one's Eeyore-like addenda, until the obedience reached pathological proportions. As a reader, Uncle Eric used the prose as a sealant, to harden his own heart. If that sounds excessive, consider the letter that he sent to his Aunt Adela from Delhi on March 25, 1930:

> My own darling Adela,
> C'est terrible!! I am broken-hearted—Life is a blank and the outlook is grey. A crushing blow has befallen me. At less than a week's notice, the Minaroo has been ordered to the B.M.H. [British Military Hospital] Lucknow,

> on permanent dooty. She left last night as broken-hearted as myself. It is too sad for words!! We shall write three times a week, but that isn't much consolation. It was, you may be prepared to hear, an absolute touch and go, and I have never before been within such an ace of declaring: she might have accepted, too!! . . . What a good wife the Minaroo would have made, to be sure! You would have been charmed with her. Tall, amiable, cheerful, Irish, a fine horse-woman, a most efficient nurse (trained at Addenbrooke's) she was most desireable [sic]. Now we may never meet again, and I am saved. I can do no better than conclude the episode, by quoting P. G. Wodehouse's "Mr Mulliner":—"My eyes to-day have that unmistakable look, which is to be seen only in the eyes of confirmed bachelors, whose feet have been dragged to the very brink of the pit, and who have gazed at close range into the naked face of matrimony."

The more I read this letter, the more bizarre it becomes. The sigh of the disappointed paramour runs sweetly up to the words "and I am saved," at which point it hits a brick wall, and we realize that what sounded like disappointment was in fact relief. I know no more about the Minaroo—or about her nickname—than what Eric divulges here, and his tenderness toward her seems at once unfeigned and entirely separable from the rest of his existence. Hence the dotting of light slang ("dooty") with which he enlivens and therefore suppresses the minor tragedy, wrapping it up for posterity as "the episode," as if it were a preposterous tale from the pen of P. G. Wodehouse.

The choice of Mr. Mulliner is no accident. I have come, a little late, to the conclusion that the Mulliner stories—told in a pub by a middle-aged raconteur of dubious social opinions named Mr. Mulliner—are as loopy and majestic as anything that Wodehouse wrote. He himself claimed that they cost him less effort than his other fiction ("It was like finding money in the street. . . . The stuff came pouring out as if somebody had turned on a tap"), and that gush allowed him to overrun, and sometimes swamp, the frontiers of the credible. Everything in Wodehouse is a gas, or a game, and his brilliance is so contagious that his admirers are apt to import the ethic of *Homo ludens* from the books, where it belongs, into their ordinary lives, where it most certainly does not. Can one, after too much Wodehouse, take anything seriously? And, when something incorrigibly serious does come along, are we Wodehouseans equipped to recognize it as such? He once wrote a book entitled "Nothing Serious," and Uncle Eric once wrote a letter in which he tells his aunt about a "beastly" medical exam and muses on the forthcoming weather ("It will be a lovely year for fruit") before turning briefly, on the third page, to another development. He writes, "I have just been enrolled as a member of the British Fascisti. There are over 400,000 members in London alone."

My first reaction, on reading those words, was to pray that my mother never read them, because she would have been mortified to discover that one whom she loved so dearly had fallen into such dreadful error. My second thought was: What a completely useless Fascist Eric Vachell must have made. And my third thought was: Wodehouse.

The British Fascisti was a small-scale outfit founded in 1923 by Miss R. L. Lintorn-Orman, who was then twenty-six years old. These do not sound like auspicious conditions for the forging of a white-hot political force. She was the daughter of a major in the British Army, and a glance at her fellow-organizers confirms a slant toward the military: Brigadier-General Blakeney, Brigadier-General Sir Ormonde Winter, and Colonel Sir Charles Burn. The movement's aims, according to a memorandum of 1924, were to "revive the spirit of sane and intelligent patriotism, uphold the established constitution and prevent the spread of Bolshevism and Communism." This is fairly mild, and the Fascisti even tendered their support to the Labour Government of 1924, offering men to quell industrial unrest. In the words of Robert Benewick, in his book "Political Violence and Public Order," the militant stand of the Fascisti "was designed to defend the established institutions, not overthrow them."

Uncle Eric's boast of four hundred thousand members is, you will be unsurprised to learn, hogwash. As Benewick points out, "It was believed that the membership dwindled to about 300 in 1934. Ten years earlier, when the organization was at its peak, its members probably numbered only a few thousand. It did not attempt to attract a mass following; it was largely a middle-class movement." As a rule, the British disdain for extremity, in thought, word, and deed, would find little to honor, and much to mock, in the swagger and strut of a full-blown corporate state. So what did Uncle Eric think he was doing?

His letter was sent from St. George's Hospital, in London, where he studied until qualifying as a doctor, in 1924—the year after the birth of the Fascisti. Throughout his correspondence, I have found only one further reference to his membership, on an undated postcard to his Aunt Adela, which concludes, "Had a fight with a Communist on Sunday afternoon in Trafalgar Square at British Fascisti Demonstration! Love E." The picture that this sentence conjures up is, I am afraid, one of undiluted farce: my great-uncle, feared by stamp collectors everywhere, throwing the lightest of punches in the hope of getting blood out of a Red. After that, there is nothing, and I like to think (though I cannot prove) that he ceased to pay his monthly subscription of six shillings (one shilling for "inactive members," which sounds more like him). Eric sailed for India in 1926; by the time he returned, in the early nineteen-thirties, the British Fascists (as they now were) had coarsened into a new revolutionary fervor, which called for the barring of Jews and aliens from public positions. Some members had crossed over to the National Fascists (motto: "Hats Off to the Past—Coats Off to the Future"), and both organizations were soon sucked into the grandest and nastiest group of all—the British Union of Fascists, founded in 1932 by Sir Oswald Mosley.

Mosley, a former Labour and Conservative Member of Parliament, remains the only Fascist leader of any note to have emerged in Britain. Of course, the most British way to cause a disturbance is not to riot but to win friends in the right places, and Benewick quotes an astounding article that appeared in the *Daily Mail* in January, 1934, under the headline "HURRAH FOR THE BLACKSHIRTS." It was written by the newspaper's publisher, Lord Rothermere, who enjoined his readers to support a "Party of the Right with the same directness of purpose and energy of method as Hitler and Mussolini have displayed." It was to the Eric Vachells of this world that Rothermere was appealing—not primarily to their ethnic prejudices (although these were latent in most Britons of the time, educated or otherwise), or to any fondness for the use of force, but, with insidious simplicity, to their fear. It is a fear of many things: otherness, insurrection, the fraying of the old order, and a loss of control. It is tinted with a helpless nostalgia, and it puts on a brave face because it dreads the world to come.

There is no way of mapping the history of my great-uncle's political beliefs, if, indeed, they endured. I know that in later life he belonged to the Conservative Club in Hove, but I doubt whether it afforded him many opportunities for punching Communists. I know that in his hundreds of letters I have found not one anti-Semitic remark, suggesting that the more rabid aspects of the Fascist mentality held no appeal. And I know that, when the summons came, Eric went to war for King and Country, and that he was decorated for his services. He had what in England is known as a good war. If only one could say the same of P. G. Wodehouse.

Anybody who is new to Wodehouse, and who regards him primarily as the inventor of Jeeves, will be flummoxed to learn that, at one period of his life, this incarnation of good humor was bruised and hounded as an object of international contempt. The sorry tale has been told before, but the sorriness is heightened by a new biography of Wodehouse, to be published here in the fall. It was written by Robert McCrum, the literary editor of the London *Observer*, who greeted me recently, in the drawing room of his home, not with a "Hello" or a "How are you?" but with the words "When did you last read 'Uncle Fred in the Springtime'?" I replied, quite truthfully, "Yesterday," explaining that I had bought, at considerable expense, an American first edition of what may be Wodehouse's greatest novel not because it contained any textual variants but because I wished to calibrate, if possible, how different the prose felt in an unfamiliar typeface. Anybody listening to this exchange would have called for an ambulance without hesitation, but McCrum just nodded sympathetically. He understood.

There is much fresh material in McCrum's book, but he rightly devotes the bulk of his attention to Wodehouse at war—or, rather, to the unappetizing sight of Wodehouse doing everything to pretend that the global hullabaloo that kept interrupting his labors was no more than a passing fuss. In April, 1939, he wrote in a letter to a friend:

> A feeling is gradually stealing over me that the world has never been farther from a war than it is at present. . . . I think if Hitler really thought there was any chance of a war, he would have nervous prostration.

In 1940, Wodehouse and his wife, Edith, were living in Le Touquet, a placid resort on the Normandy coast. Too late, they smelled trouble and tried to flee, but they were trapped by invading German forces. The couple were separated, and Wodehouse, aged fifty-eight, was herded together with other undesirables and dispatched to a series of internment camps. His final destination was a former lunatic asylum at Tost, in what is now southwestern Poland. Here he was treated with some deference, for many of his fellow-inmates knew who he was; they, and the guards, would stand beside him as he sat in the prison yard with his typewriter. Unfortunately, his captors, too, began to grasp that they had caught a prize. A request was issued by the German Foreign Office, suggesting—this was a matter not of coercion but of Machiavellian politesse—that Wodehouse travel to Berlin and give a few talks over the wireless on the subject of his incarceration. This he did.

The broadcasts themselves are free of treachery; indeed, they are a fine example of the professional writer turning his hand, under pressure, to a modest and witty recitation of an ordeal. In the third broadcast, Wodehouse said, "One drawback to being an internee is that, when you move from spot to spot, you have to do it in company with eight hundred other men. This precludes anything in the nature of travel de luxe." If he had spoken the same words on the BBC, after being released, he would have been hailed for his comic stoicism—for proving that a stiff upper lip can crack a smile. But he was not on the BBC. He was on German radio, and that meant that he was a Nazi stooge. Britain overheard his talks, and his name was damned as dirt. Even if he had not set out to buy his freedom by broadcasting, that was the result; he never went back to camp. There was a campaign of vilification against him, much of it founded on the knowledge that, while Allied troops, prisoners of war, and ordinary citizens endured privation, Wodehouse, now reunited with his wife, was staying, with the Germans' consent, at the Hotel Adlon, in Berlin.

The question of his culpability, in this foolhardy interlude, seems less pressing than the sheer oddity—the willed forgetfulness—of his existence. Wodehouse seemed to drift in and out of political consciousness, as if the catastrophe around him were a kind of ether. Now and then he would realize, with a shock, the moral gravity of his position, but mostly he would seek, like Maria Von Trapp, to remember his favorite things and, if possible, to re-create them. McCrum has dug up some home-movie footage of a country house near the Harz mountains, where Wodehouse, having exhausted his usefulness for the authorities, found refuge with aristocratic friends whom he had known before the war. There he potters about in plus fours, for all the world as if he were Lord Emsworth—the humblest and most peaceable of his fictional heroes—sampling the odor of his roses at Blandings Castle, the utopian family seat of the Emsworth dynasty, rather than a sorrowful patsy trapped on enemy soil.

The daunting fact is that the books maintain this fantasy. Wodehouse produced some of his blithest concoctions, their narratives stirred and garnished to perfection, between 1939 and 1947. Not only does the Second World War fail to intrude into Blandings or the Drones Club; those stately pleasure domes become more spirited, not less—more addictive in their rush of inoffensive thrills—because they have so much actual unpleasantness to fend off. The era that ruined the personal reputation of Wodehouse did more than any other to sharpen his art.

The end of the war found him in Paris, where he was interviewed by the British security services, most notably by Malcolm Muggeridge, who later became a writer and broadcaster of some fame. Muggeridge nailed the writer's quandary by pointing out that Wodehouse "never seems to hate anyone. . . . Such a temperament unfits him to be a good citizen in the mid-twentieth century." This chimes with Wodehouse's own memories of incarceration, during which he befriended not just his fellow-inmates ("I have never met a more cheerful crowd, and I loved them like brothers") but also his guards and interpreters ("I never met an English-speaking German I didn't like instantly"). This suggests a man swimming in the milk of human kindness, but charity loses its appeal when you consider that Tost—"Camp was really great fun," as he wrote to a friend—lay barely more than thirty miles from Auschwitz.

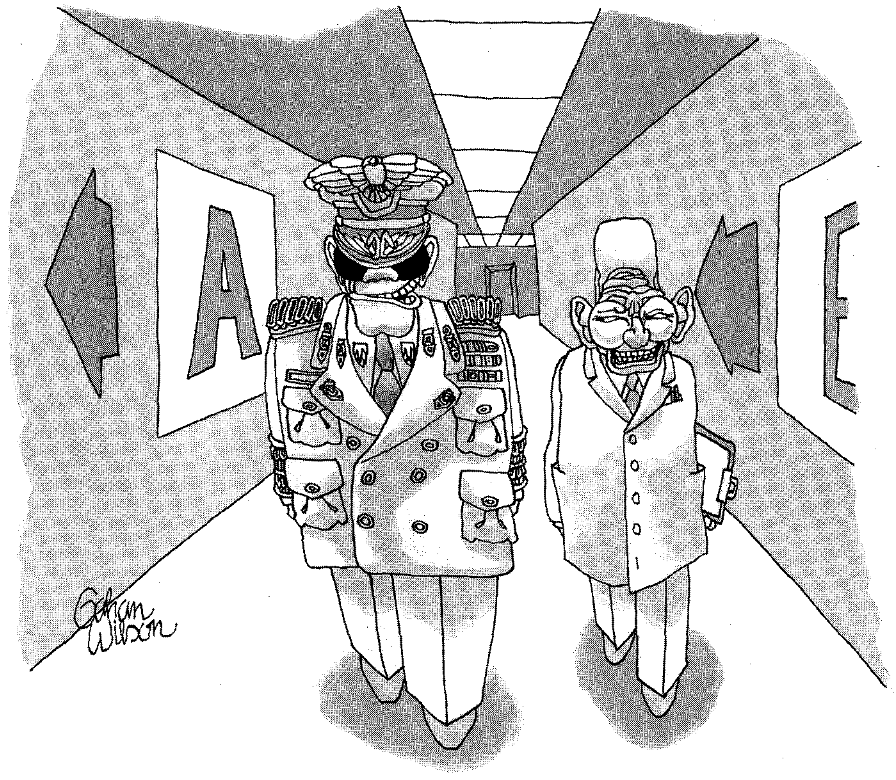
Wodehouse and his wife sailed to America in 1947. Their final home, where Wodehouse resided until his death, was in Remsenburg, Long Island. There he maintained his gruelling routine of work. A decent daily quota, for Wodehouse, had been two and a half thousand words, and the last twenty-six pages of "Thank You, Jeeves" streamed forth in a single day. (Many years earlier, he had been invited to join the Round Table gang at the Algonquin. "All those three-hour lunches," he complained. "When did those slackers ever get any work done?") During these late decades, Wodehouse's transgressions began to drain away. He had committed no crime—the official British report into his case, based on the Paris interviews, found no cause to prosecute—and a faithful peacetime readership insured that what the critics of 1942 had construed as betrayal became, if anything, proof of innocence rampant. This was a man so drunk on a verbal cocktail of his devising—a large slug of tomfoolery from Edwardian England, topped with Broadway fizz—that he regarded the world through a cockeyed, benevolent blur. Conventional wisdom may now be summed up as follows. We forgive Wodehouse his single great sin, because his fiction forgives us our smaller trespasses; in fact, it sees nothing to forgive in the first place. As Evelyn Waugh, a noted connoisseur of folly, said, in a broadcast of 1961, "For Mr. Wodehouse, there has been no Fall of Man."

That is a lovely tribute, but it will not quite do. To begin with, there is the Pratfall of Man. Consider the languid slapstick of novels such as "Heavy Weather" and its sequel, "Summer Moonshine," both of them set at Blandings, where Wodehouse liked to stage his most relaxing fictions, lapped in a perpetual summer. Even here, among the glowing lawns, I discern the cross-hatching of shadow, and I reluctantly part company with Robert McCrum, who, at the end of his biography, launches a strong case for viewing Wodehouse as, before anything else, a writer of love—as someone who was impelled by love, and whose work pours forth a ceaseless rain of the stuff, as if it were confetti or manna.

To an extent, this has to be true; there is almost no Wodehouse story, apart from some early tales of boarding-school life, that does not plunge us into the gluing and sundering of hearts. The reason he wrote about love, however, was not that it spoke to the depths of Wodehouse the romantic but that it remained unfailingly useful to Wodehouse the plotter. If what you require is the rhythmical clashing of order and disorder, over and over again, then all you need is love. Had Wodehouse been in the business of softening our souls, Uncle Eric would never have purchased his books in the first place. The Wodehouse whom my great-uncle revered, and handed down to me, is the leading Cold Fish of English fiction: the round-the-clock anti-sentimentalist, who may have bathed his tales in sunshine but who touched them with an undeniable chill. He laughs hardest at those who have been put through the wringer, and he achieves some of his most startling effects with a casual indifference to feeling:

> Mrs. Bingo was a woman who wrote novels about girls who wanted to be loved for themselves alone, but she was not lacking in astuteness.
>
> He was so crusted with alluvial deposits that one realised how little a mere bath would ever be able to effect. To fit him to take his place once more in polite society, he would certainly have to be sent to the cleaner's. Indeed, it was a moot point whether it wouldn't be simpler just to throw him away.
>
> They sat together on a rustic bench overlooking the water. It was a lovely morning. The sun shone on the little wavelets which the sighing breeze drove gently to the shore. A dreamy stillness had fallen on the world, broken only by the distant sound of Sir Alexander Bassinger murdering magpies, of Reginald Bassinger encouraging dogs to eviscerate a rabbit, of Wilfred busy among the sparrows, and a monotonous droning noise from the upper terrace, which was Colonel Sir Francis Pashley-Drake telling Lady Bassinger what to do with the dead gnu.

That last quotation comes from a tale called "Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court," one of those Mulliner stories which trample gleefully upon the claims of political correctness. Another is "Honeysuckle Cottage," the tale of a country retreat so hauntingly rosy that it transforms a hardboiled thriller merchant into a fount of feminine slush. This is the work of an artist with a target clearly in his sights. (If there is one thing worse for a Wodehouse hero than reading romantic bilge, it is the prospect of cultural innovation: "It was a poetic drama, and the audience, though loath to do anybody an injustice, was be-



"I can't believe they're actually going to let us build the thing!"

"A pox on both your summer houses."

• •

ginning to suspect that it was written in blank verse.") Immerse yourself in Wodehouse for a while and you start to subscribe, whether you like it or not, to his sneaky inversion of accepted social values—to a world tipped upside down like a snow globe, in which golf, cocktails, spats, and horse racing rise to the surface of one's concerns, while love, marriage, political causes, and world affairs sink dismally to the bottom. It is an inversion so natural to Jeeves and Bertie, for instance, that they rarely have cause to discuss it:

> "There are moments, Jeeves, when one asks oneself 'Do trousers matter?' "
>
> "The mood will pass, sir."

What was the trigger for this emotional cutoff? Why did Wodehouse feel moved to skewer his fictitious characters when they grew more needy than him? It may be that the schoolboy who found himself, for all practical purposes, motherless and fatherless, and who, far from caving in, somehow thrived on the lack of them, took a perverse pride in his own stoicism—companionable yet secretive, rarely ruffled, allergic to lamentation. He then applied it not just to his imprisonment during the Second World War, where it proved indispensable, but to the hundreds of his own creations who sensed themselves trembling in the face of chaos. Cleverness alone, even when boosted by Jeeves, would not see you through; you also required the Code of the Woosters, which urges you to sort out the tribulations of a pal and not care too deeply about your own. "I don't want to examine my own soul," Galahad Threepwood says in "Heavy Weather." "I expect the thing looks like an old boot." When Wodehouse crammed his fiction with philistine japes, he spoke for millions of people—not just upper-class Englishmen—who, like Bertie Wooster, turned first, if not exclusively, to the sports page. Has any author represented, with more élan and less condescension, the bearish thought processes of the contentedly stupid? ("If he had a mind, there was something on it." A Drones Club regular, complete in ten words.) The irony is that the voicing of those dumb, unbookish satisfactions required a control of syntax and vocabulary, in the syllable-by-syllable play of an English sentence, so joyfully ruthless that even Shakespeare, reading "The Code of the Woosters," might have stopped and sucked his pen. Wodehouse, modest in all but his art, knew as much:

> Shakespeare's stuff is different from mine, but that is not to say that it is inferior. There are passages in Shakespeare to which I would have been quite pleased to have put my name. That "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" thing. Some spin on the ball there. . . . I would place him definitely in the Wodehouse class.

Of course, it is only the spin that Wodehouse reveres. The notion that you might be aiming at wisdom, at the revelations that are vouchsafed by suffering, was all very well, but it was not in his job description. His job was to divert us and leave us none the wiser. Macbeth, at the height of his undoing, informs us that life is a tale told by an idiot, and, at that vertiginous moment, we accept the justice of his claim, whereas "Jeeves and the Chump Cyril" really *is* a tale told by an idiot, and proud to stay that way. Wodehouse knew his place:

> I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right down deep into life and not giving a damn.

The trouble is that ignoring real life can leave you open to damnations, great and small. Wodehouse courted this risk because, from the start, he liked to conjure a complete alternative world, fully furnished and ready for occupation. This is a particular knack of those authors who stand proudly at the head of the second rank, as it were, many of them displaying a suave mastery of a narrow genre. They need not be escapists themselves, but they minister unfailingly to the basic human urge to escape—to grab a key and unlock the door to Middle-earth, or 221b Baker Street, or Trollope's cathedral closes, or the Drones Club. Any attempt to locate, draw, or dramatize Blandings Castle, for example, is doomed to founder, because the place never existed, whereas Joyce boasted that you could reconstruct the actual Dublin from the pages of "Ulysses." That is one of the purposes and privileges of the first-rank author, who tends to create a world that, scorning self-containment, touches our own at every point—who returns us with a vengeance to our own travails. The green grass where Isabel Archer joins the tea party at the start of "Portrait of a Lady" may feel thoroughly Wodehousean, but some of the people she meets there, over the milk and sugar, will come to entwine and dismay her in ways that a Wodehouse reader would prefer not to think about. Is that preference understandable, or does it signify a cowardice of the soul? Proust, who has long been approached by pleasure seekers, but into whose upholstered world they should proceed with extreme caution, was in no doubt on the matter:

> Reading becomes dangerous when instead of waking us to the personal life of the spirit, it tends to substitute itself for it, when truth no longer appears to us as an ideal we can realize only through the intimate progress of our thought and the effort of our heart, but as a material thing, deposited between the leaves of books like honey ready-made by others, and which we have only to take the trouble of reaching for on the shelves of libraries and then savoring passively in perfect repose of body and mind.

That was my great-uncle, and, if I drop my guard, it could be me. The retreat from experience, the inbuilt preference for honey, is all but inevitable for the comic writer, as it is for his slavish readers—for the Wodehouse who barely noticed that he was consorting with Fascists as it was for the Eric Vachell who had once been a paid-up member of a Fascist organization, and who then looked for refuge elsewhere. What is Fascism, if not a communal delusion that the life of the masses can be run as cleanly, as efficiently, and with as little interruption from outside as the plot of a gargantuan book? When you fall afoul of the real world, your exploration of the unreal will grow ever more quizzical and devout. Comedy is still our least bestial way of admonishing the wreckage of our lives—no animal has ever laughed—but too much comedy, or nothing but comedy, has a subtle, feline habit of pushing our lives so far away from us that they cease, as if in a dream, to be our responsibility. Which Wodehousean has not woken up, on a Monday morning, and said to himself, "I prefer being Bertie Wooster to being me"?

The journey that is charted in Uncle Eric's Wodehouse collection, in the self-persuading chatter of his annotations, is a journey away from the great things—from the predations of love and war—into the wavelike soothings of the small. I, of all people, cannot begrudge him that shift, and, unlike me, he also sought to redeem himself by choosing another and more difficult voyage. The fact that Uncle Eric joined the Roman Catholic Church, serving it faithfully and deriving great succor from it, is, perhaps, no surprise; the fact that he should have done so in the year of his father's death is no coincidence, for his father had been a vicar in the Anglican Church, and one shudders to think of his response to the conversion—in his mind, the desertion—of a son.

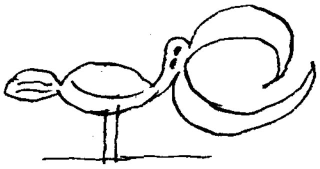
Since Uncle Eric himself passed away, I have fallen under the spell of his legacy; apart from that, however, his shade holds no sway over me. I have a wife and children. I am not, as far as I can ascertain, a Fascist, except when seated behind the wheel of a car. I neither climb nor collect large lumps of igneous rock. I own only as many stamps as I can lick. And I have not crossed over to the Roman Catholic Church, although I have noticed a dim, tigerish gleam in the eyes of Catholic friends, who circle around me as if sniffing a vulnerable soul. Nevertheless, I regret that I was unable to sit down with Uncle Eric and thrash out the whole question of the Minaroo, or of the equally vexatious love life of Gussie Fink-Nottle, a bespectacled pal of Bertie Wooster's who keeps newts.

If I were granted half an hour with my great-uncle tonight, over brown soup, I know the subject that I would broach. I would bring up Roderick Spode:

> It was as if Nature had intended to make a gorilla, and had changed its mind at the last moment. . . . His gaze was keen and piercing. I don't know if you have ever seen those pictures in the papers of Dictators with tilted chins and blazing eyes, inflaming the populace with fiery words on the occasion of the opening of a new skittle alley, but that was what he reminded me of.

The speaker is Bertie Wooster, the book is "The Code of the Woosters," and Spode, whose eye can "open an oyster at sixty paces," is a magnificent, straight-down-the-line cartoon of Oswald Mosley. The novel came out in England in 1938, before the war, long after Eric's flirtation with the Fascisti, and well into Mosley's formation of the British Union of Fascists. Wodehouse turns them, with little effort at disguise, into the Saviours of Britain, "a Fascist organization better known as the Black Shorts." So says Gussie Fink-Nottle, who goes on to explain, "By the time Spode formed his association, there were no shirts left."

It is the most withering portrait in Wodehouse, and, in my heavily pencilled copy, one of the few topics on which Eric makes no comment. If Spode led him to muse, in rueful silence, upon follies past, then Wodehouse had done my great-uncle a profound service, although Wodehouse was unable to take his own advice, and one longs to know whether he, likewise, reflected on his novel as he sat at the microphone in Berlin and did the dirty work for a nation run by genocidal Spodes. After the damage was done, he used to replay recordings of the broadcasts, as if hoping that, by sufficient incantation, the past could be undone. In the simpler mechanisms of fiction, such dissolving dreams are so much easier to arrange, and "The Code of the Woosters" ends on the heights of beautiful mockery, as Spode retreats before a matchless piece of blackmail. The Saviour of Britain, it emerges, is also a secret designer of women's underwear. Jeeves knows all about it, but then Jeeves knows everything:

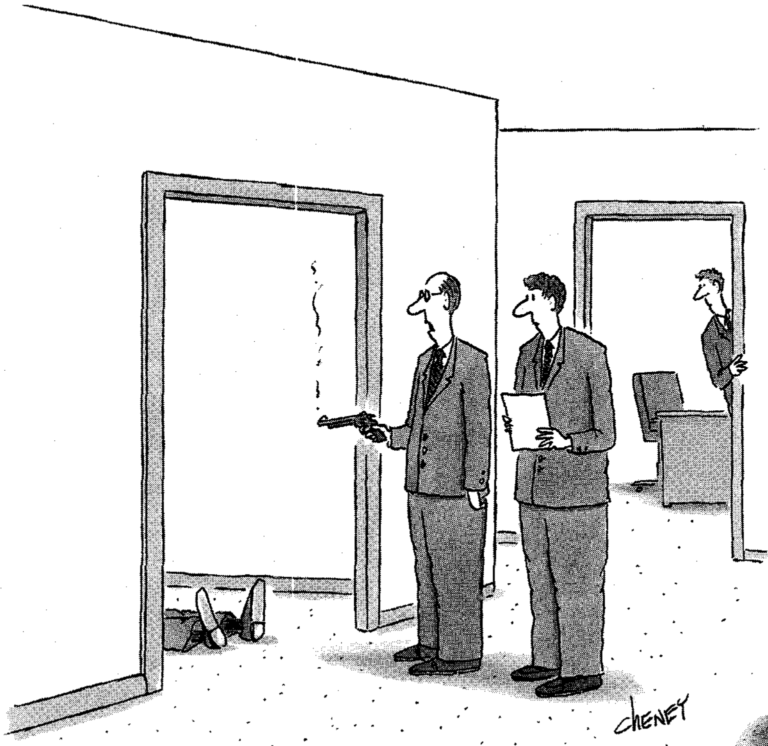


> "He is the founder and proprietor of the emporium in Bond Street known as Eulalie Soeurs."
>
> "You don't mean that?"
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "Good Lord, Jeeves! No wonder he didn't want a thing like that to come out."
>
> "No, sir. It would unquestionably jeopardize his authority over his followers."
>
> "You can't be a successful Dictator and design women's underclothing."
>
> "No, sir."
>
> "One or the other. Not both."

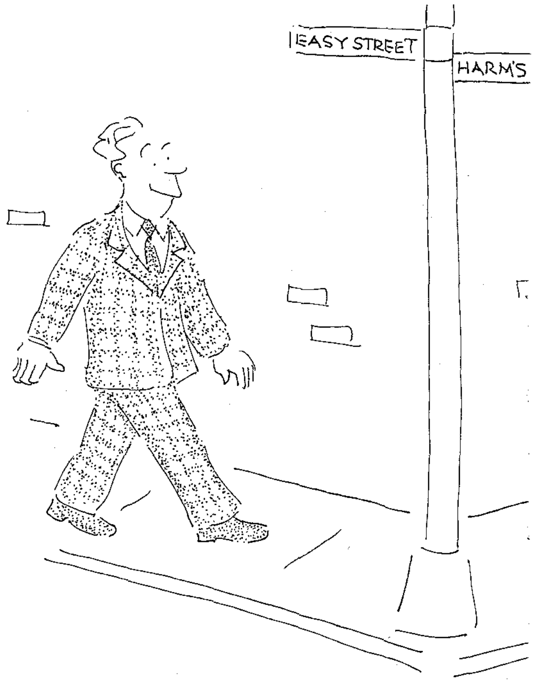
In the minds of Wodehouse and his followers, all power and glory would be wished away like this. We would all have a little hidden knicker-making, or whatever, in the corner of our lives, that could be counted against us whenever we raised our voices, or threatened cruelty, or sought to bully a tired world into believing that we were somebody of substance. That is the story of Uncle Eric. Like many of us, he wanted the good life, or, failing that, the quiet life, and he found that it was most readily available between hard covers. Good and evil, whatever we may hear these days, are not implacable forces, arrayed on opposing hills, with no contact permitted between the two. There are times when the quest for good, or the belief that the good and quiet life is all that matters, can shrivel into a minor kind of evil—when the desire to be innocent, unfoxed by the dust and dirt of relationships, and unscraped by the presence of people very different from ourselves, can dwindle into the loneliness of the bigot. We have to give a damn:

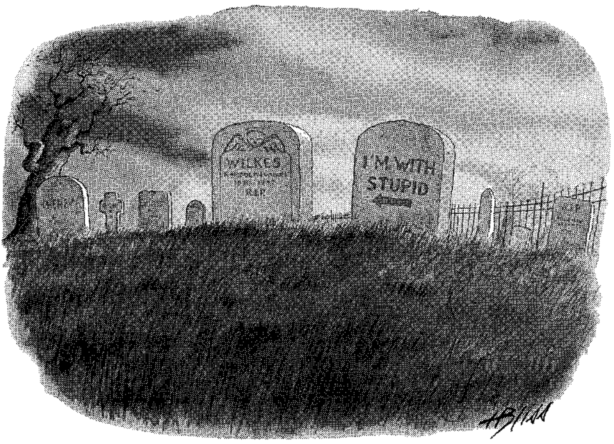
> "Life," said Charlotte coldly, "is not all gnus."
>
> "You imply that there are also wapiti, moose, zebus and mountain-goats?" said Sir Francis. "Well, maybe you're right." ♦

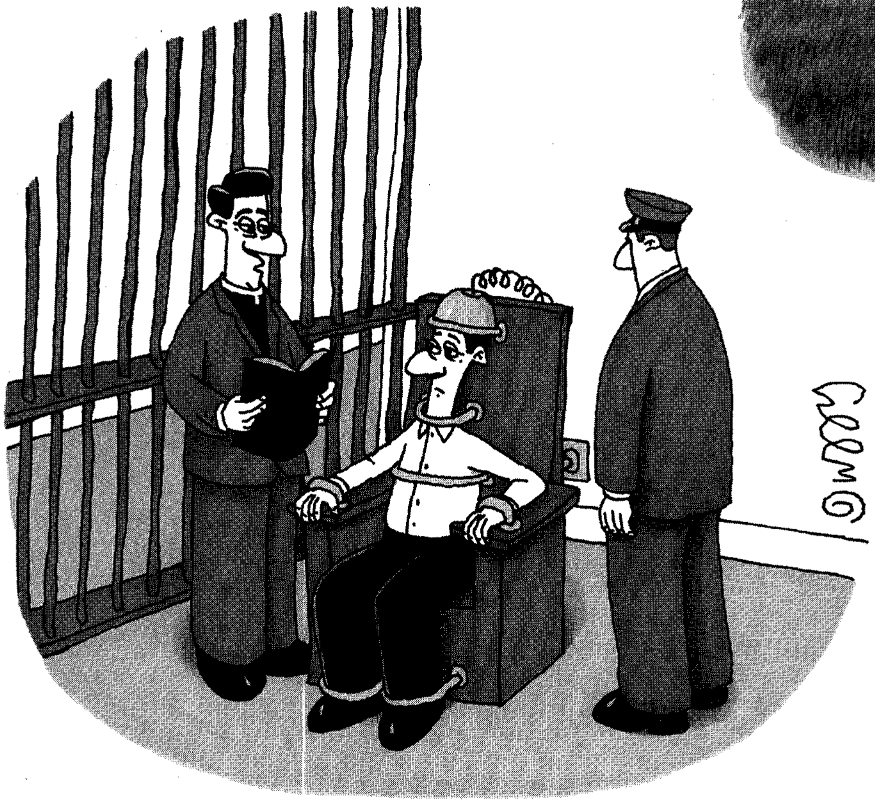
DEATH…



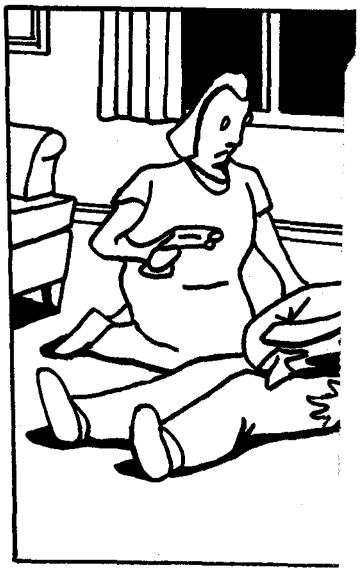
"Damn! I forgot to say, 'You're fired.'"

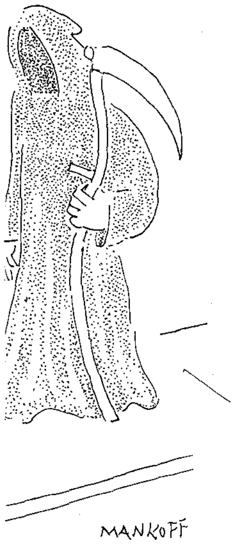

EASY STREET
HARM'S

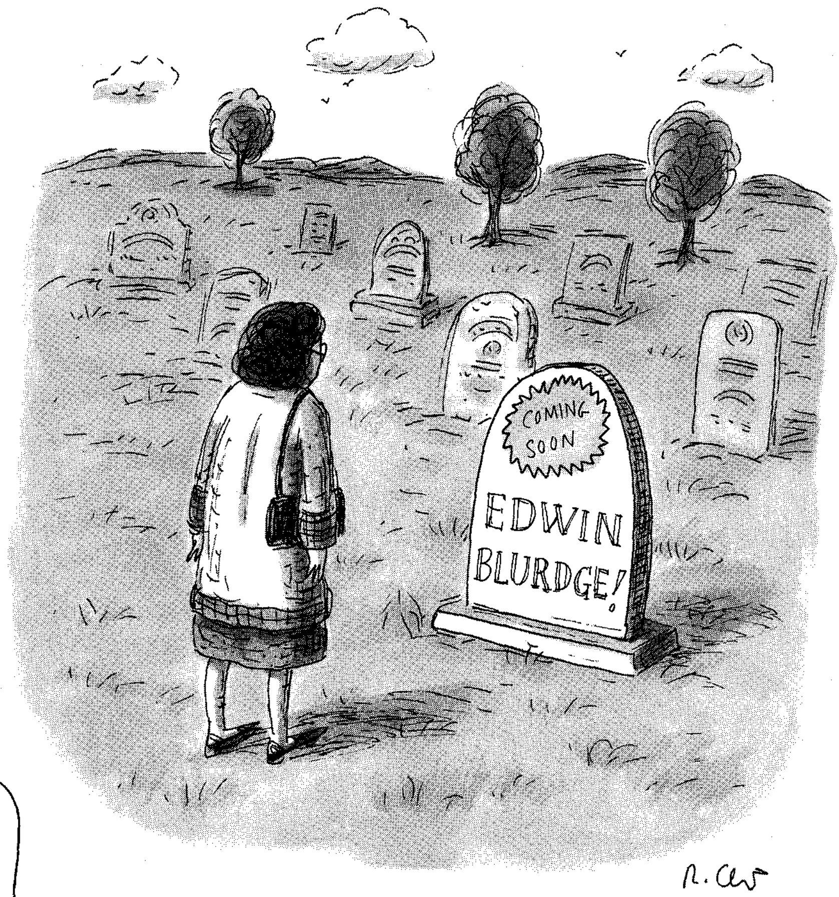

WILKES
I'M WITH STUPID



"Anyway, Ted, long story short…"






COMING SOON
EDWIN BLURDGE!
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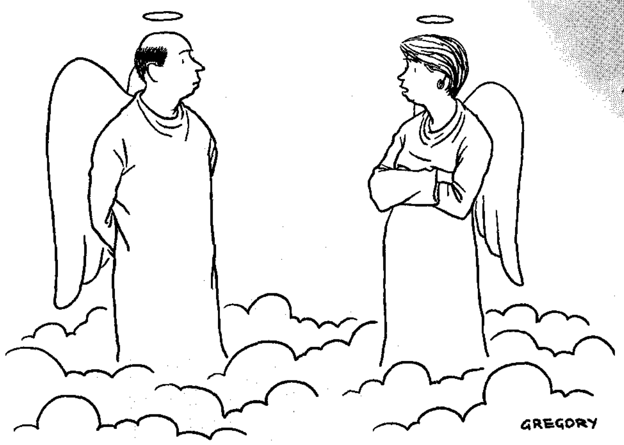
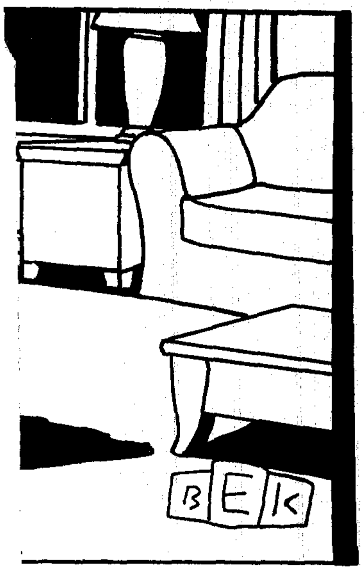
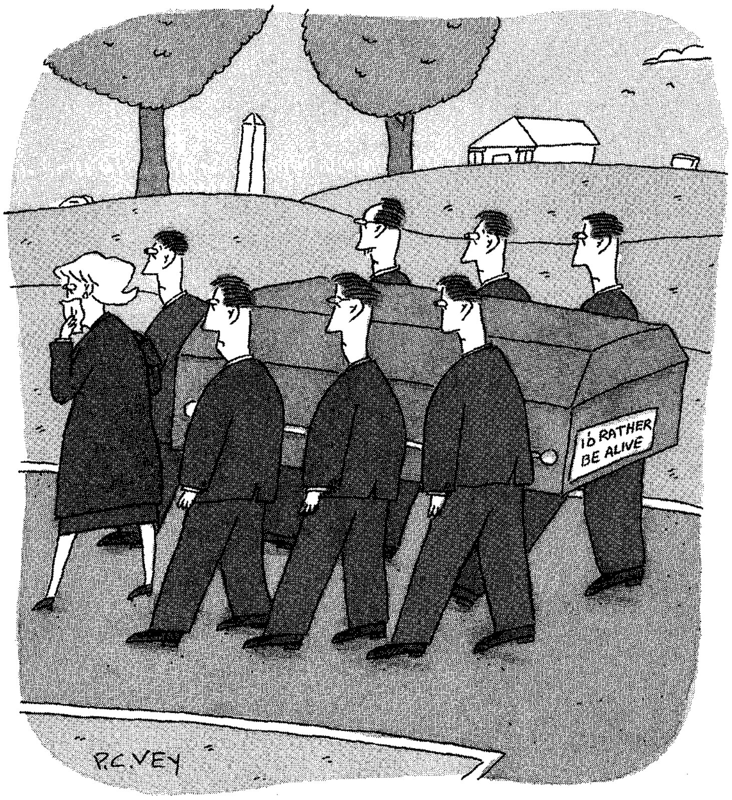
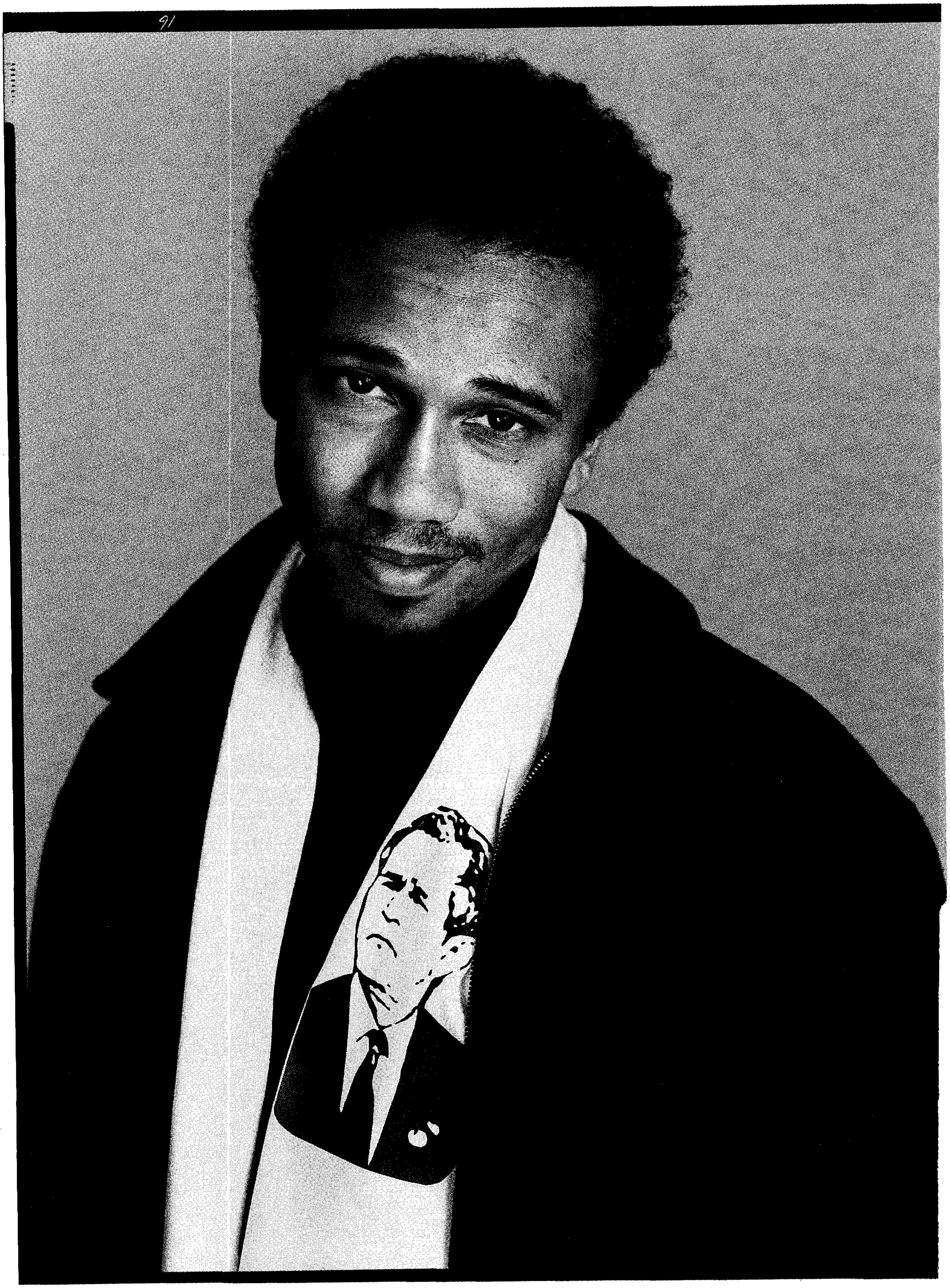


"I can't wait for all of our friends to die."



"No biggie."


I'D RATHER BE ALIVE
P.C.VEY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PROFILES

THE RADICAL

Why do editors keep throwing "The Boondocks" off the funnies page?

BY BEN McGRATH

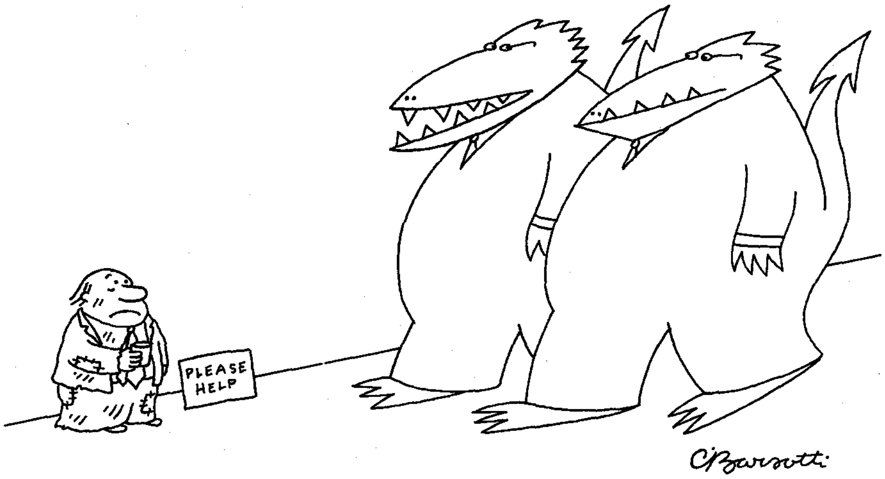
On the day of Saddam Hussein's capture, last December, the left-leaning political weekly *The Nation* celebrated its hundred-and-thirty-eighth birthday. It was a Sunday night, and the weather was dreadful—forbiddingly cold and wet, heavy snow giving way to sleet—but three hundred people could not be deterred from dropping five hundred dollars a plate for roast chicken amid the marble-and-velvet splendor of the Metropolitan Club, on Fifth Avenue. Jean Stein, a veteran of the liberal party circuit and the mother of Katrina vanden Heuvel, *The Nation's* editor, was there, as were E. L. Doctorow, John Waters, Charlie Rose, and even John McEnroe. Robert Byrd, the senior senator from West Virginia, was an honored guest; Amtrak had been advised of his itinerary, and, despite service delays all weekend, the train got him there on time. Joseph Wilson, the former Ambassador to Gabon, riding a wave of liberal good will since the politically motivated outing of his wife, the C.I.A. operative Valerie Plame, attended as well, by special invitation.

Byrd spoke first, and he delivered a generous helping of full-throated Southern oratory. Yes, it was good to see Saddam gone, Byrd said, but he was ever more convinced, what with a "swashbuckling, 'High Noon' " kind of President in office, that Iraq was the wrong war at the wrong time. "Thank God for courageous institutions like this one," he said, "which are willing to stand up to the tide of popular convention." He recited the closing lines of Tennyson's "Ulysses," and then, finishing up, invoked "the spirit of Longfellow." Standing ovation.

Toward the dessert (chocolate torte) portion of the evening, Uma Thurman rose to introduce a special guest: Aaron McGruder, the creator of the popular and subversive comic strip "The Boondocks," who, as it happens, had travelled farther than anyone else to be there, all the way from Los Angeles. McGruder, one of only a few prominent African-American cartoonists, had been making waves in all the right ways, poking conspicuous fun at Trent Lott, the N.R.A.,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON

Aaron McGruder calls his hero, Huey Freeman, perhaps "the blackest character ever to be popular in mainstream media."



"I've got it."

• •

the war effort. An exhibition of his comic strips—characters with Afros and dreadlocks drawn in a style borrowing heavily from Japanese *manga*, with accentuated foreheads and eyes—was on display in the Metropolitan Club's Great Hall. It seemed to be, as a *Nation* contributor said later, "his coronation as our kind of guy."

But what McGruder saw when he looked around at his approving audience was this: a lot of old, white faces. What followed was not quite a coronation. McGruder, who rarely prepares notes or speeches for events like this, began by thanking Thurman, "the most ass-kicking woman in America." Then he lowered the boom. He was a twenty-nine-year-old black man, he said, who got invited to such functions all the time, so you could imagine how bored he was. He proceeded to ramble, at considerable length, and in a tone, as one listener put it, of "militant cynicism," with a recurring theme: that the folks in the room ("courageous"? *Please*) were a sorry lot.

He told the guests that he'd called Condoleezza Rice, the national-security adviser, a mass murderer to her face; what had they ever done? (The Rice exchange occurred in 2002, at the N.A.A.C.P. Image Awards, where McGruder was given the Chairman's Award; Rice requested that he write her into his strip.) He recounted a lunch meeting with Fidel Castro. (He had been invited to Cuba by the California congresswoman Barbara Lee, who is one of the few politicians McGruder has praised in "The Boondocks.") He said that noble failure was not acceptable. But the last straw came when he "dropped the N-word," as one amused observer recalled. He said—bragged, even—that he'd voted for Nader in 2000. At that point, according to Hamilton Fish, the host of the party, "it got interactive."

Eric Alterman, a columnist for *The Nation*, was sitting in the back of the room, next to Joe Wilson, the Ambassador. He shouted out, "Thanks for Bush!" Exactly what happened next is unclear. Alterman recalls that McGruder responded by grabbing his crotch and saying, "Try these nuts." Jack Newfield, the longtime *Village Voice* writer, says that McGruder simply dared Alterman to remove him from the podium. When asked about this incident later, McGruder said, "I ain't *no* punk. I ain't gonna let someone shout and not go back at him."

Alterman walked out. "I turned to Joe and said, 'I can't listen to this crap anymore,' " he remembers. "I went out into the Metropolitan Club lobby—it's a nice lobby—and I worked on my manuscript."

Newfield joined in the heckling, as did Stephen Cohen, a historian and the husband of Katrina vanden Heuvel. "It was like watching LeRoi Jones try to Mau-Mau a guilty white liberal in the sixties," Newfield says. "It was out of a time warp. Who is he to insult people who have been putting their careers and lives on the line for equal rights since before he was born?"

By the time McGruder had finished, and a tipsy Joe Wilson took the microphone to deliver his New Year's Resolutions, perhaps half the guests had excused themselves to join Alterman in the lobby. A *Nation* contributor estimated that McGruder had offended eighty per cent of the audience. "Some people still haven't recovered," he said, sounding thrilled.

"At a certain point, I just got the uncomfortable feeling that this was a bunch of people who were feeling a little too good about themselves," McGruder said afterward. "These are the big, rich white leftists who are going to carry the fight to George Bush, and the best they can do is blame Nader?"

He went on, laughing a little, "I was not the right guest for that event. I'll be the first one to say that. It was one of those reminders that, yeah, I'm not this political leader that people are looking for."

As a talented young black man who is outspoken in his political convictions, McGruder has grown accustomed to inordinately high expectations. The Green Party called him last year, asking if he might like to run for President. He had to point out that he wasn't old enough. "I want to do stuff that has a moral center—stuff that I can be proud of," he continued. "But I'm not trying to be *that guy*, the political voice of young black America, because then you have to sort of be a responsible grownup, for lack of a better word. And it's like—you know, Flip Wilson said this, he said, 'I reserve the right to be a nigger.' And I absolutely do, at all times."

Huey Freeman, the hero of "The Boondocks" and McGruder's supposed alter ego, has not cracked a smile in five years of syndication. From the day he and his little brother, Riley, moved out of Chicago's South Side to live comfortably with their granddad in the suburbs—the boondocks—Huey, a practicing member of the "church of self-righteousness," has been treating readers of the funnies page to an unhealthy dose of indignation, paranoia, and hatred. He is perhaps ten years old, in that ageless cartoon way, with an Afro, a high forehead, perpetually knitted brows, and an unnatural familiarity with the precepts of socialist black nationalism. He has roughly equal contempt for Dick Cheney, Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Santa Claus.

"Since when are millions of Americans ready to wake up to the rantings of an angry black kid?" Huey's best friend, Caesar, a dreadlocked, droopy-eyed transplant from Brooklyn, once asked him, in an early installment of the strip. The joke was obvious and boastful; by then "The Boondocks" was appearing more or less daily in some two hundred and thirty newspapers (it is now in three hundred), including the Los Angeles *Times*, the Washington *Post*, and the Chicago *Tribune*. More or less daily because editors tended to suspend Huey and company from their pages on occasions when the intentions of the strip's author—to provide "a daily foot in the ass of The Man"—were achieved a little too vividly. (A dozen editors had already expelled the Freeman family for good; still others had relocated McGruder to the op-ed page.)

The Freeman trio—Huey, Riley (a wanna-be thug), and Granddad (a cantankerous skeptic and resigned pragmatist)—represent "three different facets of the sort of angry-black-man archetype," according to McGruder. He recently published an anthology of the strip's first few years, titled "A Right to Be Hostile." More angry books are on the way. "Profits of Rage" is the working title of one, a text-only manifesto fashioned after the works of Michael Moore and Al Franken. "Huey's Hate Book," a planned coffee-table volume, is another.

Like the Freeman brothers, McGruder was born on the South Side of Chicago, though he didn't stay there long. The McGruders—Aaron, his parents, and an older brother, Dedric, who is now a part-time political cartoonist—shuffled around some before settling, when Aaron was six, in the middle-class suburb of Columbia, Maryland. (Aaron's father works for the National Transportation Safety Board.) Columbia is in some ways the inspiration for Woodcrest, the fictional home of the "Boondocks" characters. It was a planned community—envisioned as a sort of integrationist, post-civil-rights utopia—developed by the Rouse Company in the mid-nineteen-sixties, and featuring an official town "Tree of Life," and streets and neighborhoods with names like Hobbit's Glen and Morning Walk and Elfstone Way. (Huey and Riley live on Timid Deer Lane, one block over from Bashful Beaver.)

McGruder's was a fairly typical, well-adjusted eighties childhood, and he had typical interests: "Star Wars," Charlie Brown, kung fu. He went to a Jesuit school—"a very strict, very, very white Jesuit school"—outside Columbia from seventh through ninth grade. "Those were the most oppressive years of my life," he told me. (Huey and Riley, not coincidentally, attend J. Edgar Hoover Elementary.) They were also the years in which he was exposed to his greatest, and perhaps most surprising, comedic influence. "When I was in seventh grade, I discovered Monty Python," he said. "That shit still kills me. I try to get my friends to watch that and they just can't get it. 'No, no, no, it's funny—the lumberjack!' 'Life of Brian' is, to me, the most brilliant piece of satire ever—it's just brilliant. He's trying to write 'Romans go home' in Latin and he can't do the Latin right." McGruder shook his head. "A lot of black people ain't up on Monty Python like they should be."

In tenth grade, he transferred to public school and began, for the first time, really, to hang out with other black people. He listened to a lot of hip-hop music. It was the era of politically conscious rap: Public Enemy, KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone), X-Clan. "All that sort of radical, pro-black-nationalist type of music—it was just a fad, but at fifteen and sixteen you're very impressionable," he told me. "It was one of the few times, I think, in black history when as a young person you could be cool and intellectual at the same time." (McGruder, who is proud to call himself a nerd, no longer thinks of himself as cool. "Most cool niggas I know are broke," he said.)

The first person ever to publish "The Boondocks" was the disgraced New York *Times* fabulist Jayson Blair, who was then editing *The Diamondback*, the campus paper at the University of Maryland, where McGruder majored in African-American studies. "We weren't friends, but he seemed like the brother who had figured out the system," McGruder recalls of Blair. "It was like, 'You don't seem one hundred per cent down, but you're definitely not a Tom. Somehow you're making it work.' " That was the end of 1996; less than two years later, having found an audience among the largely white Maryland readership, McGruder signed a deal with the Universal Press Syndicate, the publisher of Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury," and in April of 1999 "The Boon-

"Pease porridge or gruel?"

docks” began appearing in a hundred and sixty papers—one of the biggest launches in the history of comics.

Even after the Metropolitan Club melee, McGruder has continued to receive and accept invitations to deliver lectures—at banquets, on college campuses, in corporate boardrooms. The Sony Music Group flew him to New York in February for one such talk, and he agreed to meet me for dinner afterward. He arrived at the restaurant, a small, country-style spot near Gramercy Park, wearing a James Brown T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He is not, in person, imposing or striking or noticeably angry—not the kind of guy you'd expect to be challenging anyone to a fight. He is short, with soft features, a slight goatee, and the beginnings of an Afro. Unlike Huey, he smiles—sheepishly and often.

“Somebody has to sort of translate the drums for white folks, and occasionally they call me to try to do it,” McGruder explained. It was a good hustle, the lecture circuit, he said. In the course of three hours—McGruder tends to answer each question with a fifteen-minute monologue—he returned repeatedly to this familiar trope of cynical entrepreneurialism. People like Ann Coulter and Bill O'Reilly, he said, were hustlers. “It's like, ‘The more ridiculous shit I say that's hurtful and hateful and racist, the more you stupid rednecks will buy books,’ ” he said, in a deep, slightly nasal baritone. “I don't even get mad at them, 'cause I get what it is. I'm in the same game.”

Larry Elder, an African-American radio host and a frequent McGruder critic, was a hustler, too: “He decided to be the black guy that makes money by saying the things that white people want black people to say.” (Elder, in a recent op-ed column, suggested that an award for the “Dumbest, Most Vulgar, Most Offensive Things Uttered by Black Public Figures” be dubbed the McGruder.)

“I'm always on the fence: do I want to be one of those guys?” McGruder said. “I love Michael Moore”—Moore wrote the foreword to “A Right to Be Hostile,” praising McGruder's “bodacious wit”—“and I see what he does. He's got the game down, and that's not a bad thing. People act like you can't be a left-winger and be rich at the same time, like that's some type of hypocrisy. It's not hypocrisy. You gotta get paid. This isn't the days of the civil-rights era, where you can change the world with a picket sign. You gotta get your money up.”

McGruder's politics are to the left of Dennis Kucinich, but he retains an old man's conservative, almost reactionary instinct, which, combined with the mo'-money shtick, gives “The Boondocks” a healthy comic balance. On the page, of course, he is able to separate these competing strands into distinct characters, each of whom comes off as both likable and laughable. The tension is harder to reconcile in real life, when he is by turns idealistic and dead serious (Huey), immature and carefree (Riley), and grumpy and tired (Granddad).

He told me that we have a state-run media in America, and then, catching himself, added, “I know what this sounds like: conspiracy theory. But you know what? A conspiracy is something hidden. This shit is out in the open. People are just too dumb to see it.” Huey was in control (in the strip, he publishes his own broadsheet, *The Free Huey World Report*), arguing, with conviction, that contemporary journalism is “a goddam sham.”

Another minute, though, he channelled Riley—his shoulders were slumped, and he bowed his head a little forward, avoiding eye contact—and said that when he can help it he prefers not to read the newspaper. “I'm not the guy that wants to spend my life being some kind of closet intellectual,” he said. “I want to play ‘Vice City.’ I just want to drive around and shoot innocent people. I'm all about video games.”

Addressing the rampant commercialism in contemporary rap music, he slipped effortlessly into Granddad mode. “I've never understood all the obsession over diamonds and jewelry and designer clothes—that just seems *female* to me,” he nearly groaned.

McGruder didn't leave himself a lot of time to eat. He pointed at a nearby table and said, “If that was Bill Watterson”—the author of “Calvin and Hobbes”—“neither one of us would know it. Bill Watterson was in two thousand papers. A million more people have read ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ than will ever read ‘The Boondocks.’ But Bill Watterson decided he didn't want to be a personality.”

Aaron McGruder is, without question, a personality. While we waited for the check, he leaned back and rattled off what amounted to a left-wing standup-comedy routine, touching on the major and minor issues of the day, his soft-spoken manner giving way to a performer's bravado.

“You make a movie about a senile Republican President,” he said, referring to the made-for-TV “The Reagans,” “and they gonna answer back by trying to put his face on the fucking dime. That's how gangsta they are.”

Next came the Super Bowl, and the flap over Janet Jackson's exposed breast. “We got—how many?—five hundred dead in Iraq, and several thousand more wounded, and they worried about a titty. A titty! What kind of sorry-ass nation is this?”

As we left the restaurant, a small elderly white woman seated a few tables away got up and approached McGruder. She said she was from New Zealand. “I like everything you've been saying,” she said. “I agree with you.”

“That's a good New Zealander,” he said as he pushed open the door.

Several years ago in “The Boondocks,” an earnest black lawyer named Tom DuBois (he's married to a white woman) wondered aloud, “Is there anyplace or anything that has been left unscarred by the cynics and the purveyors of bitterness, anger and despair? Does there exist, anywhere, an unadulterated land of childhood fantasy and imagination? Is there no innocence left in the world?” Huey Freeman responded, with his trademark scowl, “What about the funnies?”

McGruder doesn't read the funnies, and he doesn't like the people who draw them. Growing up, he was a “Peanuts” fan, like everyone else, and he counts “Doonesbury” and “Bloom County,” featuring Opus, the iconic political penguin, as influences. But mostly he sees the comics page, with all its benign Dennis the Menaces and Heathcliffs and Blondies, as the domain of “seventy-year-old white men,” some of whom—like Bil Keane, the author of the vaguely Christian “Family Circus,” and Mort Walker, of “Beetle Bailey”—he freely admits to not respecting.

“I don't go to the cartoonist conventions,” McGruder said. “I went once, to the Reuben Awards”—the Oscars of cartooning—“and I didn't feel very welcome. I felt a palpable sense of resent-

"Nadine, the motorcycle is very loud, but after Bernie finishes his ride and parks her just so, he'll cut her down and idle, and then you can tell him all about your Happy Day Nut Cookie recipe."

ment. Bil Keane was the m.c., and he opened doing more than one joke that was clearly aimed at me. It was raw—just some fucked-up shit. O.K., and yet, if I get out of my chair right now and beat the shit out of you, then *I'm* the bad guy? You're sitting here, clearly dogging me—not by name, but how many black cartoonists are working? He told some joke about diversity in comics. Like 'There's a lot of diversity in comics these days. They don't have to be funny, they just have to be diverse.' There were a couple of shots at me where I was like, 'Motherfucker, you don't *know* me. We're not cool.' "

McGruder believes that Huey, who gets his name from the Black Panther Huey Newton, is "ultimately the blackest character ever to be popular in mainstream media, other than maybe Chuck D and Flavor Flav," founding members of Public Enemy. Certainly, in the comics industry—"an industry with no soul," McGruder says—he does not have stiff competition.

Colored faces were not uncommon in the early comics—vaudeville sendups of immigrant life that helped fuel the turn-of-the-century newspaper wars—but they were, as a rule, severe caricatures. (R. F. Outcault, the creator of the famous "Yellow Kid," depicted poor blacks living in a place called Possumville.) It wasn't until 1965, with Morrie Turner's "Wee Pals," that the mainstream press carried a syndicated cartoon strip by a black man, with recurring—and respectably human—black characters. And it took the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, to spark real national distribution for the strip. That same year, Charles Schulz gave Charlie Brown a black friend, Franklin, and Brumsic Brandon, Jr., started "Luther," which was named after Dr. King. "Luther" was set in the ghetto, and Brandon said that his intention was to "tell it like it is." In the strip, which ran until 1986, Brandon introduced characters with names like Oreo and Hardcore, but he dealt only sparingly with race relations.

By the late nineties, when McGruder was starting out, there were still just two widely read comic strips being drawn by blacks: "Curtis," by Ray Billingsley, and "Jump Start," a decidedly bourgeois feature, by Robb Armstrong. "The Boondocks," with its dreadlocks and *manga* influences, *looked* immediately different from these and everything else in the newspaper. Today, thanks in no small part to McGruder's accelerated success, the typical comics page offers at least a modest degree of diversity. There is a strip called "La Cucaracha," with mostly Latino characters, which began in 2001 and runs in about fifty papers. And there are more new black-themed strips enjoying minor distribution, like "Candorville" and "Housebroken."

McGruder's influence in this respect has often been acknowledged, and occasionally condemned. At the Image Awards ceremony, he was cited for his "dignified representation of people of color," but in recent years the signature gag of his strip has probably been his annual "Most Embarrassing Black People" awards. (LL Cool J, Jesse Jackson, Whitney Houston: few escape his scorn.) Larry Elder is not alone among black voices in decrying the negativity of "The Boondocks." Robert Johnson, the chief executive of BET (that's Black Exploitation Television, or Butts Every Time, according to Huey), has said that his employees do "more in one day to serve the interest of African-Americans than this young man has done in his entire life." As for his imitators in the comics, McGruder, ever confrontational and protective of his turf, does not find their emulation flattering. "I look at everything from a hip-hop perspective," he says. "My point of view on that is very obvious: get off my dick, leave my shit alone."

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A few days after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, McGruder called the Universal Press Syndicate and asked what Trudeau planned on doing with

Victoria Roberts

"If you wanted to leave, why didn't you just say so?"

"Doonesbury." "They said, 'Garry's not touching it,'" he told me. "It was like a make-or-break moment, and I just decided this is why I got into cartooning. I'm not going to waste it talking about Puffy." (Puffy, or Puff Daddy, has been a frequent target of McGruder's ridicule, primarily for his role in steering hip-hop away from intellectual engagement and toward preening self-display.)

Later, he went out for lunch with his friends Reginald Hudlin, the film director, and Chris Rock, the comedian. Hudlin asked Rock whether, if he still had his own TV show, he would be mining the tragic events for material. "He was like, 'Oh, yeah!'" Hudlin told me. "He right there on the spot did fifteen minutes on 9/11 that was genius, and just to hear it done as impeccably as Chris did it was inspiring to all of us. And I think that really freed Aaron's mind up. He did some of his greatest work following that."

Before September 11th, McGruder had been struggling mightily under the burden of non-stop deadlines—"My greatest weakness, and, sadly, everybody knows it, is my lateness"—to the point where his health was failing. ("Ever see a seven-day-a-week cartoonist?" Berkeley Breathed, the creator of "Bloom County," once said. "They all look like Keith Richards at 5 A.M.") In 2000, shortly after moving out of his parents' basement to an apartment in Los Angeles, he had been hospitalized with stress-related symptoms. He had been thinking seriously about giving up the strip altogether.

In "The Boondocks," post-9/11, Huey was quick to announce that he planned to "stay cynical." He began calling the F.B.I. to suggest names of terrorist financiers and war criminals worthy of prosecution: Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Henry Kissinger. John Ashcroft appeared on television to explain his new "Turban Surveillance Act," and the prospect of a congressional "anti-evil" bill, it was suggested, would force Vice-President Cheney into hiding once again. The *Daily News* banned "The Boondocks" for several weeks. At one point, in the middle of October, McGruder finally relented and put a muzzle on Huey. Adapting an idea from Rock's lunch-table improvisation, he replaced "The Boondocks" for a week with

VICTORIA ROBERTS

a new, faux-jingoistic strip, "The Adventures of Flagee and Ribbon." (Said the ribbon to the flag, "Hey, Flagee, there's a lot of evil out there." Replied the flag, "That's right, Ribbon. Good thing America kicks a lot of *@#!")

McGruder's deadline troubles abated. "The strips were writing themselves," he said. Their primary focus had shifted, as he put it, from "life and love and teachers and lawnmowers to Bush and Bush and, well, Bush."

Trudeau, who, before long, did incorporate September 11th into "Doonesbury," admires McGruder, but he said that such a singularity of purpose "always runs the danger of becoming tedious." He went on, "When I was starting out, my editor once said, 'You can write about Vietnam this week, but you damn well better write about football next week.' His point was that you have to take your knee off the reader's windpipe from time to time."

For McGruder, though, noisy defiance is an end in itself. "I was very disappointed that I didn't get the Pulitzer that year," he said. "That sounds like some really egotistical shit to say"—among funnies-page artists, only Trudeau and Breathed have ever won it—"but I really felt like that was mine by a long shot. The shit that I was able to get away with after September 11th was really astounding."

Last October, McGruder granted Condoleezza Rice's wish and put her in the strip. In the Monday installment of a weeklong series, Caesar announced that he had a "simple and easy plan to save the world." On Tuesday, he elaborated: "Maybe if there was a man in the world who Condoleezza truly loved, she wouldn't be so hell-bent to destroy it." Huey agreed. "Condoleezza's just lonely and bitter," he said. And so on. The boys began composing personal ads: "Female Darth Vader type seeks loving mate to torture"; "High-ranking government employee with sturdy build seeks single black man for intimate relationship. Must enjoy football, Chopin, and carpet bombing." Huey even anticipated his critics—this is a favorite device of McGruder's—by observing, "What I really like about this idea is that it isn't the least bit sexist or chauvinistic."

Some readers accused McGruder of effectively calling Rice a lesbian (both McGruder and Greg Melvin, his editor, insist that this never crossed their minds), while others complained that the joke was indeed unacceptably sexist and chauvinistic. The Washington *Post's* executive editor, Leonard Downie, Jr., thought so, and he withheld the entire week's worth of "Boondocks"—the longest such suspension in the paper's history. (The *Post's* ombudsman, Michael Getler, later sided with McGruder, writing that he "found the sequence of strips within the bounds of allowable satire.")

McGruder, true to form, was unchastened. A month later, Huey and Caesar were *still* trying to find Rice a date, and in the course of their continued plotting they'd managed to call Ann Coulter a man and to suggest that Larry Elder is gay.

Politically charged comics are not the domain solely of the left ("Mallard Fillmore," for instance, stars a Republican duck), and in some respects McGruder's closest compatriot in subversion is his opposite: Johnny Hart, the seventy-three-year-old white man behind "B.C." Hart became a born-again Christian in the late nineteen-eighties, and he has since been accused of evangelizing in his comic—sometimes at the expense of other religions. Most notably, last November, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Hart drew a "B.C." strip in which a caveman—the feature's main character—is seen entering an outhouse and heard exclaiming, from inside, "Is it just me, or does it stink in here?" The word "SLAM," arranged in a vertical line, or an I formation, as some readers observed, occupied the space between two panels. Crescent moons—symbols of Islam—appeared throughout. Was Hart saying that an entire world religion stinks? Many Muslim readers thought so. Hart denies it. "It would be contradictory to my own faith as a Christian to insult other people's beliefs," he said. On the other hand, given the bewildering nature of the cartoon, it is hard to imagine what else he could have meant.

"So many strips are so completely unfunny that when you read a comic strip and it doesn't make you laugh, and you don't even see where the joke is supposed to be, it's not surprising," McGruder told me. "Because that's more the norm than the exception: 'Uh, I don't get it.' " This, he suggested, can serve as a cover for barbed editorializing—and cartoonists know it. "Those of us who do politically oriented comic strips delight in those moments when we can sneak one past the gatekeeper," McGruder continued. "Hart's working hard and being clever to put across, I think, a very hateful point. I'm often accused of the same thing. To me, as long as it's fair, as long as one side is not more restricted than the other, then let him say what he wants to say—and I'm not saying he don't deserve to get his ass beaten. I'm always sort of on the lookout for someone who's going to step to me over what *I* say."

For the past few years, McGruder has been trying to adapt "The Boondocks" for the screen. Last July, Sony bought the rights to produce both an animated television series and a feature film based on the strip, and Fox signed on to distribute the TV show as a prime-time vehicle. McGruder's Hollywood career entails making appearances at events—Hugh Hefner's birthday bash, Puff Daddy's MTV Movie Awards party—where he is apt to run into the kinds of people who might wish to step to him over what he says. "It's terribly awkward, especially when they're nice," McGruder told me. Will Smith was one such example. "I had demolished Will, just demolished 'Ali,' and that movie he did with Matt Damon—I called it 'Driving Matt Damon.' And Will is one of, like, seven black men that can get a movie green-lit in Hollywood that costs over twenty million dollars. It's like, 'Oh, I burned *that* bridge.' "

To help McGruder deal with the stresses that accompany entertainment-industry success, he occasionally works with a personal trainer—part martial-arts expert and part meditation guru—named Rashon Kahn. Kahn, who has also worked with the comedians Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Jamie Foxx, says that his goal with

McGruder is "to help him stay grounded with his journey." This has involved, at times, showing up at McGruder's home to cook for him. ("I always recommend to everyone, 'Eat your vegetables, your salads, your lean meats,' " Kahn says.)

Amid all this, the comic strip has suffered. For one thing, McGruder doesn't draw "The Boondocks" anymore. He passed the sketching and inking duties to a Boston-based artist, Jennifer Seng, around the time of the Condoleezza Rice flap, last fall. "If something had to give, it was going to be the art," he told me. "I think I'm a better writer than artist." Maybe so, but his writing attention does not seem as focussed on the strip, either.

More and more, "The Boondocks," which once stood out for its density, seems spare: a lot of white space; little, if any, visual progression from panel to panel. McGruder often gives us Huey or Granddad—it doesn't really matter who—watching television, alone. The text comes directly from the TV, usually in the form of a political joke ("Bush and Bush and, well, Bush"), and the character's reaction, if there is one at all, is immaterial. The strip has become an almost incidental vehicle for one-liners.

" 'The Boondocks' is brand-new, relatively speaking, and he's already stripped away the backgrounds," Garry Trudeau told me. "And he was using cut-and-paste images *before* he handed off the art. And he also stopped telling stories, for the most part, which I thought was a pity."

"Sometimes he's stuck on a deadline and we try to jam out a bunch of strips together," Reggie Hudlin told me. "My mind naturally goes to a narrative. And he goes, 'No, no, no, just need a punch line.' I once said Aaron's exhaustion comes from doing essentially a comedy haiku every day."

McGruder says that he suffers from "comic claustrophobia." He has come to hate the confines of the strip as a medium, and this realization has made him gravitate toward screenwriting instead. "You mean I got all this space?" he said. "Dialogue? It's like a prisoner getting to run outside and do cartwheels."

Hudlin, who directed the black comedies "House Party" and "Boomerang," is McGruder's entrée to the Hollywood hustle, and his partner in adapting "The Boondocks" for animation, and other projects. The two met back when Aaron was in college, and they had "one of those freakish, separated-at-birth moments," Hudlin said. (Hudlin, who is forty-two, also grew up worshipping Monty Python.) He sees "The Boondocks" as belonging to a multimedia tradition, extending from music—the old-school hip-hop of McGruder's high-school years, say—to the page and the screen, occupying what he calls the "space for a kind of playful black intelligentsia."

Hudlin and McGruder have written a couple of scripts and a graphic novel together. The book, called "Birth of a Nation," reimagines the 2000 Florida election fiasco in East St. Louis, Illinois, and has the city seceding from the union to form its own country, Blackland. (In Blackland, Denzel Washington is on the twenty-dollar bill.) It will be published this summer.

Most of the time, though, they work on the pilot for Fox. It's been twenty years since "Fat Albert," the last black animated series on a major network, went off the air, so the prospect of "The Boondocks" going to prime time is significant. Largely by necessity, the show is meant to be more character-driven than the current incarnation of the strip, a reversion to the early period of its syndication—the days of life and love and teachers and lawnmowers. Animation demands a nine-month lead time, which precludes the kind of topicality that McGruder has come to rely on.

If there are two models guiding the show's development, they are probably "The Simpsons," the beacon of virtually all televised satire and animation, and, paradoxically, "All in the Family," the seventies sitcom starring Carroll O'Connor as the bigoted Everyman Archie Bunker. McGruder has frequently been told by studio executives that they're looking to re-create "All in the Family"—to be just controversial enough to draw attention, that is, without getting kicked off the air, by creating another Archie Bunker type, a "character who just spouts off ignorance." He finds this line of reasoning suspicious. "As I understand it, the creators and the networks originally thought, O.K., well, this show's going to be great, 'cause everybody's going to get the joke that Archie's a lovable idiot, and people are going to look at it as a satire of racism," he said. "They found out that the reason people loved the show is because they agreed with Archie Bunker."

The strategy for the "The Boondocks" revolves, in part, around confronting this fact head on and—what else?—undermining it. Among the new characters that McGruder and Hudlin plan to introduce is a neighborhood handyman called Uncle Ruckus—"just the worst, most bitter, angriest motherfucker you could imagine," as McGruder sees him—who will serve as the town bus driver, the school janitor, the local gardener, the babysitter, the massage therapist. "Everywhere you look, he's there," McGruder said, almost giddily. "This guy just loves all the little white children in the neighborhood"—Uncle Ruckus is black—"and he's basically straight out of the eighteenth century. I mean, he is a slave." Uncle Ruckus brings a new, fully realized archetype to the varieties of haters in McGruder's universe; he is "the world's most self-hating black man."

McGruder lives in a penthouse apartment on a leafy side street at the edge of Beverly Hills, with a balcony overlooking the Four Seasons Hotel. I visited him there shortly before he flew to Seoul to oversee the animation process for the "Boondocks" pilot, which is scheduled to be delivered to Fox later this month. (Even if it succeeds, the show will likely not air until next year.) He had come down with bronchitis while in New York for the Sony lecture, and the combination of his health and the logistics surrounding his impending Asia trip ("The dude only owns, like, two sweaters," McGruder's assistant, Shawn Socoloff, told me) meant that he was even farther behind than usual on his deadlines.

The décor of the apartment was an immediate reminder that McGruder is not an enthusiastic grownup. He keeps a Yoda statue in one corner, among some potted plants; PlayStation sits on the floor; and there's a Bruce Lee poster on the wall. Elsewhere there are light sabres, a pair of Incredible Hulk fists, and a figurine of Lucy from "Peanuts." When I arrived, he was busy playing executive producer in a series of overlapping conference calls—cell phone in one hand, home phone in the other—and watching TV with the volume turned down, ostensibly trolling for ideas for the strip. (ABC Family was on, showing a rerun of the late-eighties sitcom "Full House.")

At issue was a planned casting session for the show which McGruder worried was being done on the cheap. "What does Reggie think? . . . Shawn, can you get Phil on the line? . . . Four days is not enough time. We were told a week. . . . It's getting to the point where you try to cut costs so much that it's not worth doing at all." Already, RZA, of the Wu-Tang Clan, Ja Rule, and the actress-singer Brandy had auditioned to do the voices. (Female characters are notably rare in "The Boondocks," but adult women, as is the norm in animation, will play the young boys.)

He began flipping the channels while he was on hold, and landed on BET. The rapper 50 Cent appeared on the screen—it was a Top Ten video countdown—and he was shirtless, with lots of jewelry around his neck, smoking a blunt. "Black people are doing bad things," McGruder-as-Granddad muttered. "They doing real bad."

Jen, the "Boondocks" artist, called from Boston, wondering what she should draw for the Sunday strip, whose all-or-nothing deadline was the following morning. (Most Sunday editions are expected a month before publication; in this instance, the three-week mark was approaching.) He told her that he was tapped out, no ideas. "Worse comes to worst," he said, "I'll call the syndicate tomorrow and throw in the towel on this one, tell them it ain't happening." In the meantime, he suggested that she just draw Huey watching TV. "But try to do it a little different, somehow, from all the other times," he said.

One of McGruder's friends joined him, and he continued to flip the channels, looking for inspiration. They started watching "The Apprentice," Donald Trump's reality show, in which, at the end of each episode, Trump looks one contestant in the eye and says, "You're fired." Finally, an idea came to McGruder.

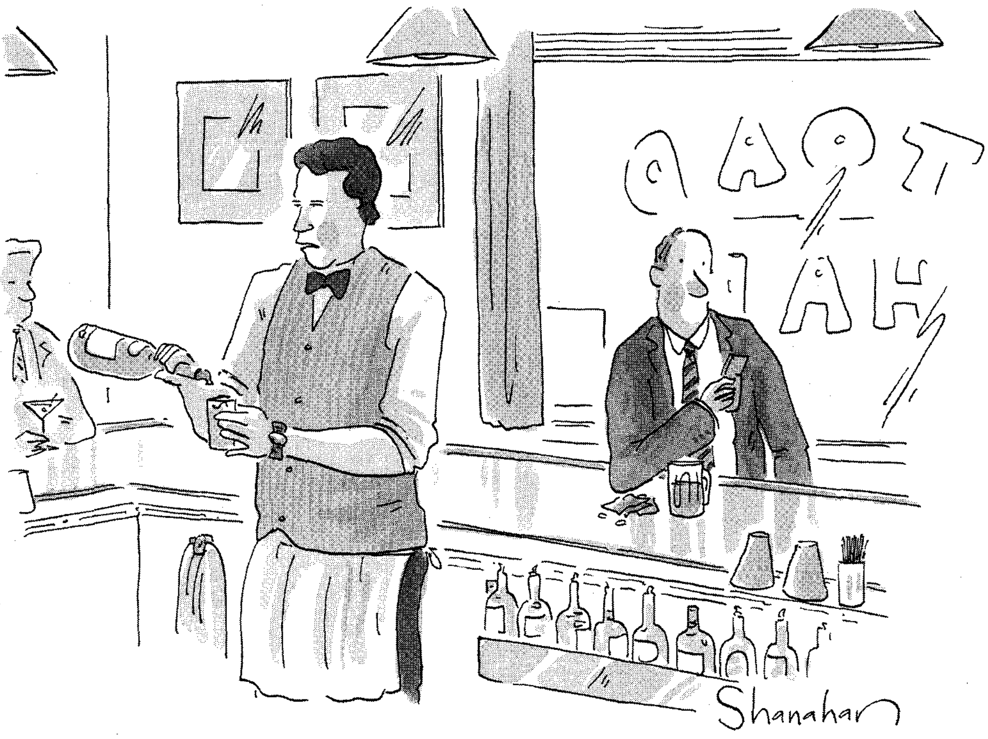
"For several days, I've been looking for the joke in all of the exporting jobs overseas," McGruder said the next day. "So, at the end of the show, it just hit me: if they really want to teach these kids a lesson, they'll fire all of them and move the reality show to Mexico. And that ended up being the joke. Remember I told Jen just to draw one panel of Huey watching television? That's a joke I can sort of fit into that one panel. There's a narration box at the top: 'A very special episode of NBC's "The Apprentice." ' And then, from the television, you hear, 'We figured out it's more cost-efficient to do the show from Mexico, so you're all fired.' So that saved the day, and that's how it goes. That's how it often works."

There is, at first, something disappointing in this vision of America's most radical cartoonist at work: slouched on the sofa, armed with a remote and TiVo, not a pencil or a drawing board—or even a snarl—in sight. McGruder is not yet thirty, and already he is jaded, content to settle for the kind of perfectly passable work he so often eviscerates others for. Or maybe this is the point: he is not yet thirty. He has aspirations to raise hell for a whole new audience, in a whole different way, and he is afraid of blowing the opportunity on a stupid youthful mistake. With that in mind, he has decided to lay off Condoleezza Rice—seemingly a prime target these days, in the wake of Richard Clarke's allegations—for the near future. "Having that show on the air just opens up a whole new realm in terms of power and influence," he said. "I want to say the things no one else can say, but it's a tightrope walk. Up till now it has always paid off for me. I'm waiting for the moment when it will *not* pay off."

Last week, "Doonesbury" took on Rice, even going so far as to accuse her of having "little flecks of blood" on her hands. "The Boondocks," meanwhile, was just getting around to discussing "The Passion."

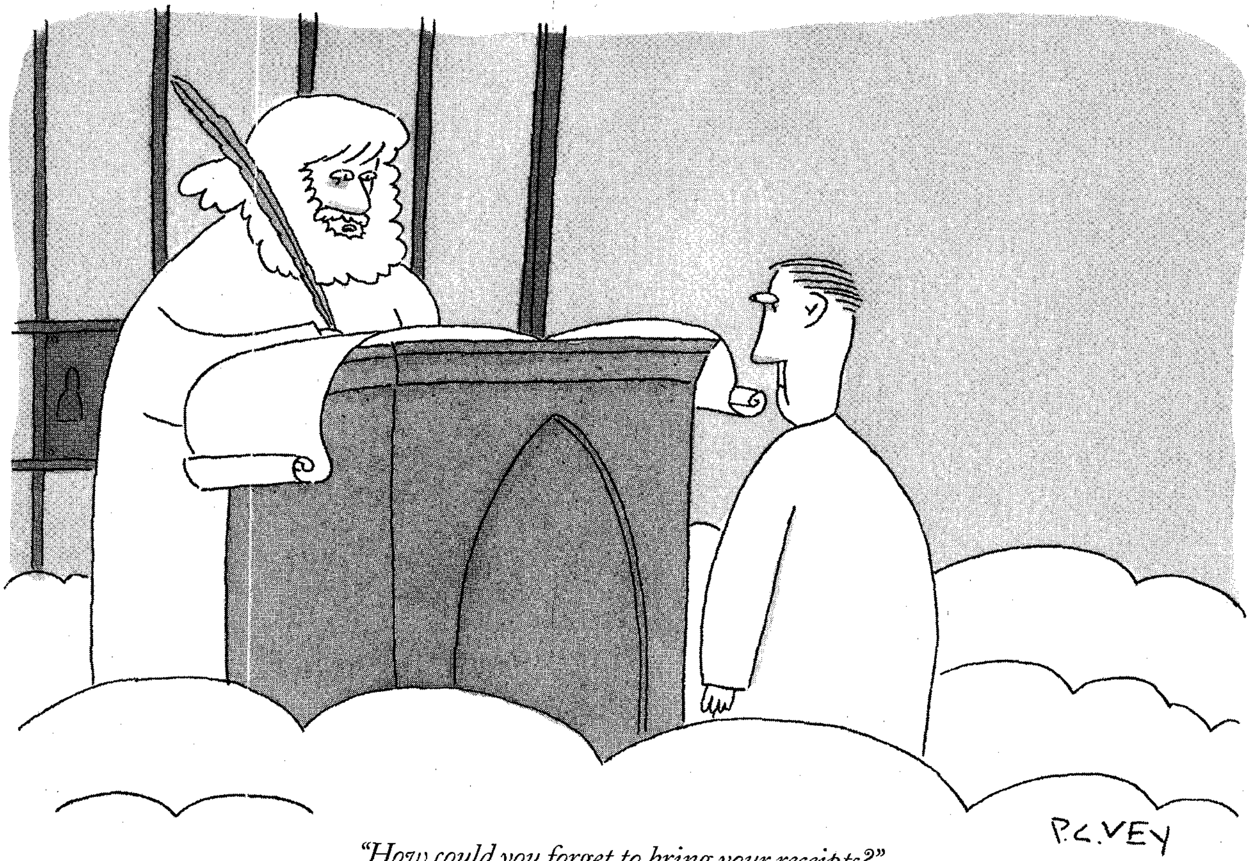
That last night in L.A., before flying off to Korea, McGruder sounded both weary and cocksure. "I wanted to be a cartoonist, and like six months after that I got signed, and I'm here," he said. "And ten years from now I'll be, like, getting an Academy Award. This is not the beginning and end of my life."

There is an old "Boondocks" strip in which Huey and Caesar are shown discussing the logo design for their intended revolution. Huey storms off, frustrated. "I don't know why I gotta lead the revolution *and* illustrate it, anyway," he says. "I don't even like drawing." ♦

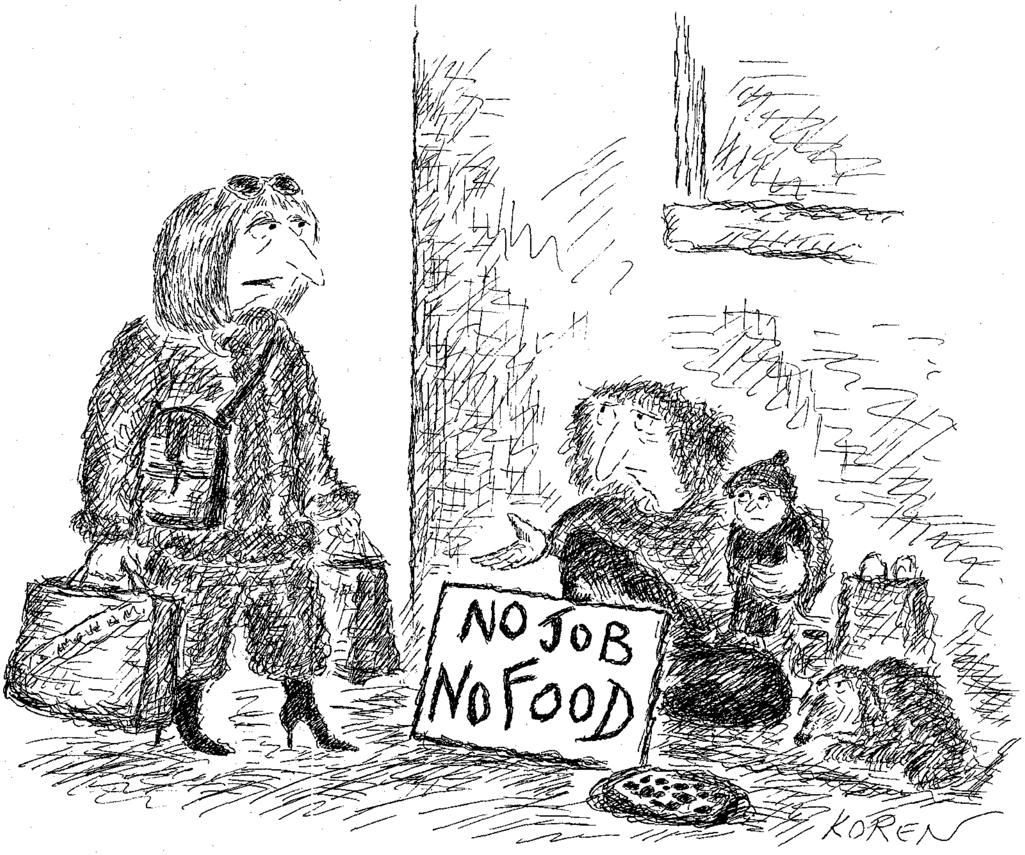


"If it's your wife, I'm not here."

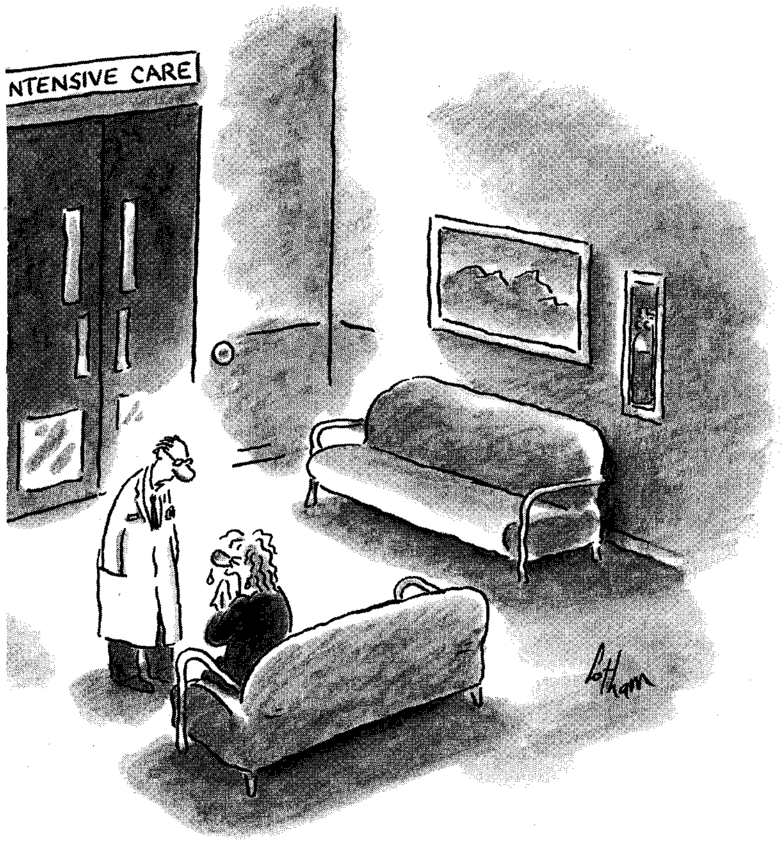
AND TAXES



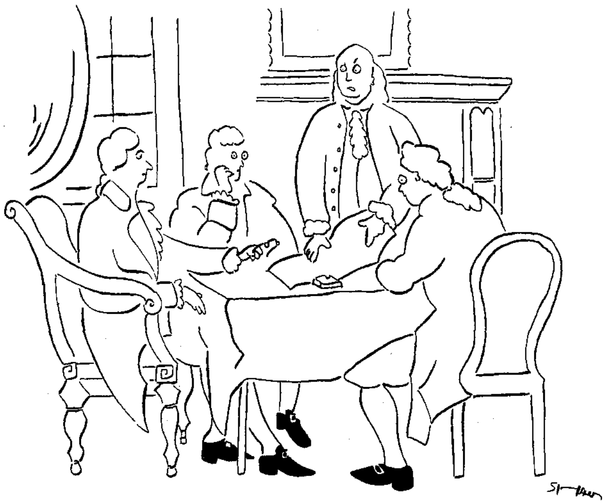
"How could you forget to bring your receipts?"


NO JOB
NO FOOD
KOREN

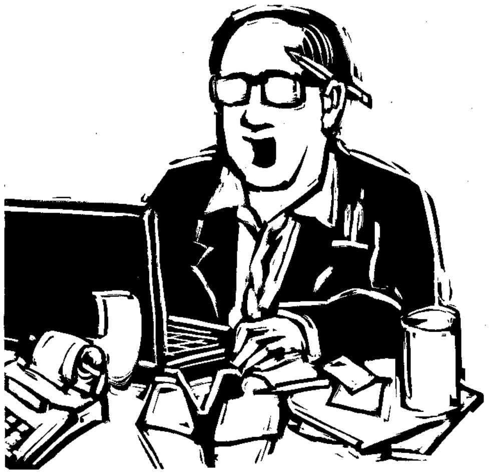
"Why don't you just use your tax cut?"


NTENSIVE CARE

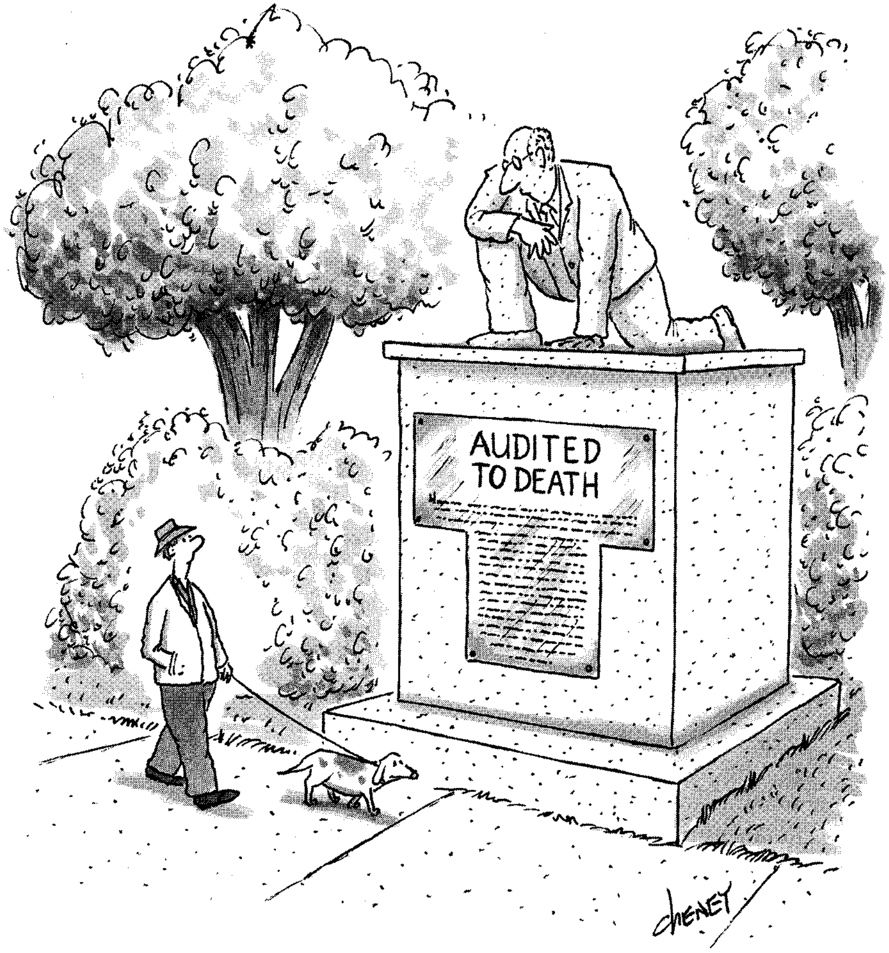
"The I.R.S. can't hurt him anymore."



"Can't we put in something about rich white guys don't have to pay taxes?"



"Do you want to do that hilarious thing where we read the itemized deductions and then say 'in bed'?"


AUDITED
TO DEATH

ANNALS OF HOLLYWOOD

COMEDY FIRST

How Harold Ramis's movies have stayed funny for twenty-five years.

BY TAD FRIEND

The lives of many young comedy writers and directors are divided into two parts. There is childhood, ruled by bland Hollywood comedies such as "The Goodbye Girl" and "Oh God!" And then there is the glorious, unruly adolescence of the person they became after seeing a film that spoke to them in ways their parents didn't—a film that moved them to emulation. For Jay Roach, the director of the Austin Powers films, that movie was "Groundhog Day," in 1993. For Jake Kasdan, the director of "Orange County," it was "Stripes," in 1981, and, even more powerfully, "Ghostbusters," in 1984. For Adam Sandler, it was "Caddyshack," in 1980. And for Peter Farrelly, who directed "There's Something About Mary" with his brother Bobby, it was "Animal House," in 1978.

These comedies have several things in common. They attack the smugness of institutional life, trashing the fraternity system, country clubs, the Army—even local weathermen—with an impish good will that is unmistakably American. Will Rogers would have made films like these, if Will Rogers had lived through Vietnam and Watergate and decided that the only logical course of action was getting wasted or getting laid or—better—both. In "Caddyshack," the teen-aged caddy, Danny, asks his club's best golfer, Ty Webb (Chevy Chase), for advice about life. Webb frowns thoughtfully:

TY
Do you take drugs, Danny?

DANNY
Every day.

TY
Good. So what's the problem?

Another thing these films have in common is that they were all directed and/or co-written by Harold Ramis. Ramis also acted in "Stripes" and "Ghostbusters" and directed the movies "Vacation" and "Analyze This." Anyone who saw these films as a teen-ager can probably still quote from one of Ramis's signature tongue-in-cheek pep talks, which resemble John F. Kennedy's "Ask Not" speech turned inside out. In "Stripes," for instance, Bill Murray exhorts his fellow-soldiers by yelling, "We're not Watusi, we're not Spartans—we're Americans! . . . That means that our forefathers were kicked out of every decent country in the world. We are the wretched refuse. We're the underdog. We're mutts. Here's proof." He touches a soldier's face. "His nose is cold."

Ramis was one of the first of the new generation of comic voices to come out of the Second City improv troupe in Chicago, which trained Murray, John Belushi, Chris Farley, and Mike Myers, among many others, in the sketch-driven style that has come to dominate modern comedy. "Sloppiness is a key part of improv," the screenwriter Dennis Klein told me. "And Harold brought that to Hollywood, rescuing comedies from their smooth, polite perfection." The secret of American commercial success is to hijack a subculture and ransom it to the mainstream. What Elvis did for rock and Eminem did for rap, Harold Ramis did for attitude: he mass-marketed the sixties to the seventies and eighties. He took his generation's anger and curiosity and laziness and woolly idealism and gave it a hyper-articulate voice. He wised it up.

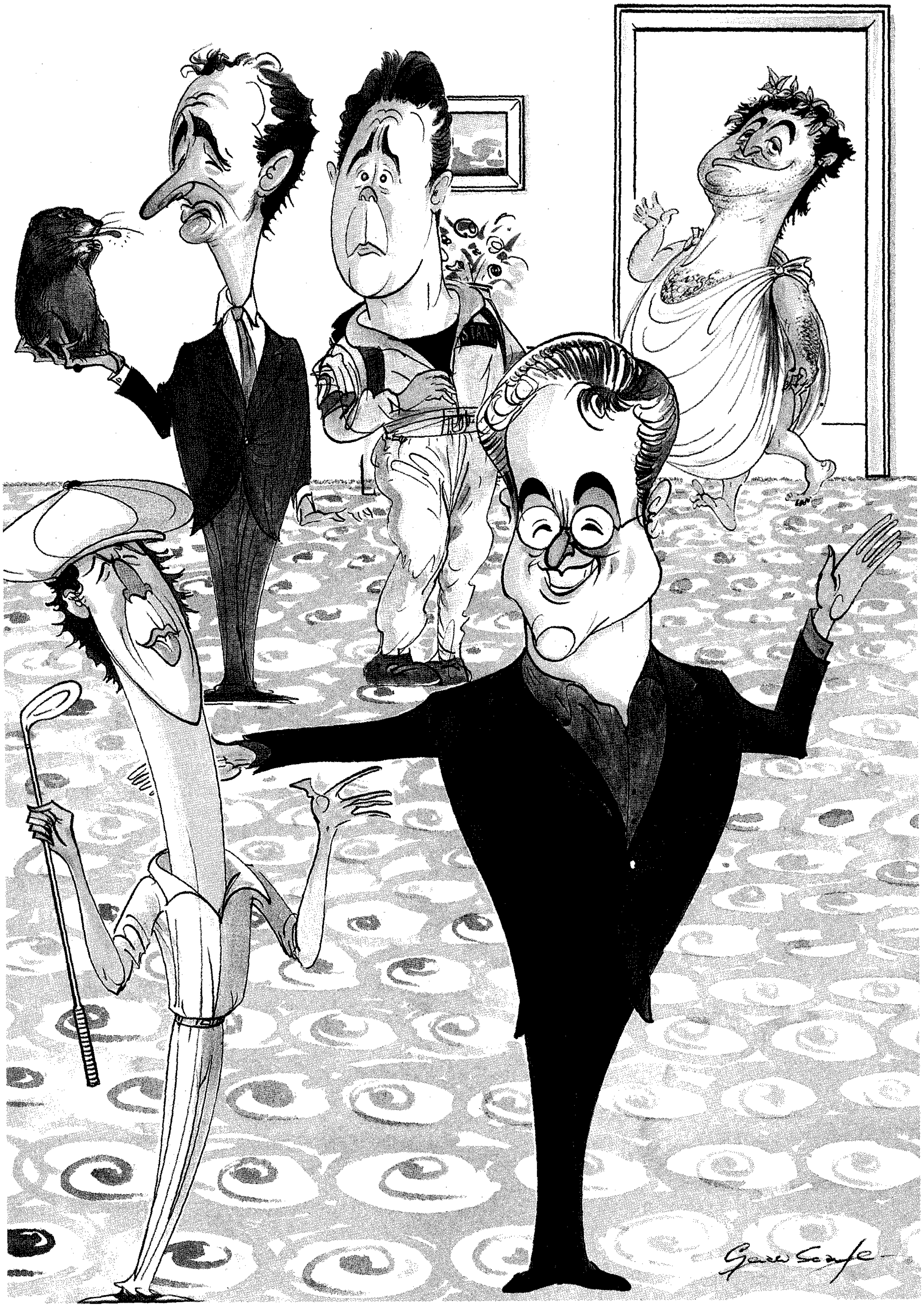
"Animal House," which is set at Faber College in 1962, broke all box-office records for comedies, earning a hundred and forty-one million dollars. The film's humor was raunchy for its day: the oddballs of Delta House drink and loaf and chase girls, living a male adolescent's dream of college life. But what really engaged the audience was the antagonism between the frat and the dean. Dean Wormer, a sneaky and paranoid character, is clearly a Nixon figure, and by opposing him the Deltas came to seem like the moral equivalents of Daniel Ellsberg or John Lennon. They weren't, of course. After the Delta leaders, Otter and Boon, have destroyed their young fraternity brother's car on a road trip, Otter throws his arm around him and explains, "You fucked up. You trusted us." When Ramis was writing dialogue for Otter and Boon, whose irony and worldliness set them apart from the others, he had himself and a college friend in mind, and it's Otter (played by Tim Matheson) who delivers the requisite nonsense speech when the fraternity is hauled before the disciplinary council: "You can't hold a whole fraternity responsible for the behavior of a few sick, perverted individuals. For, if you do, then shouldn't we blame the whole fraternity system? And, if the whole fraternity system is guilty, then isn't this . . . an indictment of our entire American society? Well, you can do what you want to us, but we're not going to sit here and listen to you bad-mouth the United States of America. Gentlemen!"

"Animal House" made wise-ass hedonism seem political; "Caddyshack" made it seem mandatory. When Judge Smails (Ted Knight), the Waspy leader of Bushwood Country Club, lectures the caddy about mending his ways, his sanctimony almost compels disobedience: "Danny, Danny, there's a lot of, well, *badness* in the world today. I see it in court every day—I've sentenced boys younger than you to the gas chamber. Didn't want to do it—I felt I owed it to them. The most important decision you can make right now is, What do you stand for, Danny: goodness, or badness?"

Bad is usually good in Ramis's films, if only because good is so obviously bad. In "Groundhog Day," Ramis's masterpiece, a jaded Pittsburgh weatherman named Phil Connors (Bill Murray) is

GERALD SCARFE

Ramis gave actors he worked with, like Chevy Chase, Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and John Belushi, a new, wised-up comic voice.


Gerald Scarfe

"Before we discuss destroying the competition, screwing our customers, and laughing all the way to the bank, let's begin this meeting with a prayer."

• •

forced to repeat Groundhog Day over and over again in the tiny town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. At one point, he devises numerous ways to kill himself:

INT. CADILLAC

PHIL begins to accelerate, turning a fast lap around the square. Gus looks back at the police car chasing them.

GUS
I think they want you to stop. . . .

PHIL
It's the same thing your whole life. Clean up your room, stand up straight, pick up your feet, take it like a man. Be nice to your sister. Don't mix beer and wine—ever.

The car skids around and comes to a stop straddling the railroad tracks. . . .

PHIL
(eyes gleaming)
Oh, yeah—don't drive on the railroad tracks.

GUS
Well, now, that's one I happen to agree with.

The director Jay Roach says that the six films Murray and Ramis made together define a level of achievement he calls "extreme comedy." "You would watch people in the audience just lose their minds," he told me. "Harold Ramis is the yardstick of what you want to reach for, of people's bodies around you going into convulsions of joy while your brain is thinking and your emotions are deeply tied in to the characters, and you're going, 'Oh my God, This is the best two hours I've ever spent.'"

One morning in late February, the producers of a film called "The Ice Harvest" gathered in the banquet room of Forty One North, a restaurant in Northbrook, Illinois, for their first preproduction meeting. Harold Ramis arrived early, wearing his standard uniform (titanium-rimmed spectacles, an untucked long-sleeved black T-shirt, and black pants) and his standard expression (the therapist scanning his waiting room). Ramis's line producer, Tom Busch, greeted him with a warning: "The schedule has us starting to shoot on April 5th, which is the first day of Passover."

"There is no evidence that Exodus happened in the spring," Ramis replied. "It's totally arbitrary." Leaving Busch looking blank, Ramis moved to the buffet and piled his plate with lox. He loves to eat, and in recent years his gangly six-foot-two-inch frame has filled out, catching up to his size-14 feet.

Focus Features had finally green-lighted the film the day before, after six weeks of haggling with actors' agents over the lean fourteen-million-dollar budget. The "Ice Harvest" script, adapted by Robert Benton and Richard Russo from Scott Phillips's novel, is about a lawyer named Charlie who just stole two million dollars from his boss. The action takes place on Christmas Eve as Charlie, who is trying to skip town, gets trapped by a snowstorm, old relationships, and a series of double crosses. Although the film is set in Wichita, it would be shot in Chicago's northern suburbs, close to Ramis's house, in Glencoe, which he shares with his wife, Erica, and their two sons. Ramis loved the material and had agreed to cut his regular directing fee—five million dollars—by more than eighty per cent. This would be his first directing job in two years, and his first attempt to make a comic film noir. John Cusack had signed on as Charlie, with Billy Bob Thornton in a supporting role.

Ramis had also been weighing an opportunity to direct "The Dinner Party," a comic remake of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" starring Bernie Mac as the disapproving father. "Interracial couple, big issues, and it would be my full fee," Ramis said. "Ashton Kutcher is in," he later told me dryly. "So that's a relief." But he turned the film down. "It's too Disney. It would need a page-one rewrite to get at the real issues." He went on, "I have no trouble selling out—I'm a benevolent hack, in a certain way—but I want to pander for something I believe in."

Ramis was born in 1944, two years before the official commencement of the baby boom, and he has always been just the right age for whatever was starting to happen in the culture: he grew his hair long when the Beatles did, in 1964; moved back to Chicago just in time to witness the riots at the Democratic Convention, in 1968; joined Second City as it was being transformed from a bunch of guys in skinny ties trading arch banter about psychoanalysis into a no-holds-barred freak-fest; became the first head writer of Second City's cultish syndicated show, "SCTV"; then, in 1978, he brought that style of irreverence to Hollywood. After becoming financially successful, in the eighties, Ramis began, in the L.A. way, to look inward: he tried couples therapy, family therapy, parenting therapy, past-lives therapy, and personal therapy; he divorced and remarried; he lost forty pounds on a liquid-protein diet and then regained it and more; he joined a men's group—the Road Kill Men's Council—and became something of a Buddhist. In all, he has resisted the claims of late middle age. When Violet, his daughter from his first marriage, gave birth recently, Ramis declared that he wished to be addressed not as Grandpa but as GrandDude.

At the restaurant, Ramis was joined by a half-dozen executives and producers. Ramis told me that he visualizes meetings in advance, planning how he wants them to go, and often speaks last, synthesizing the best remarks. "Harold's too secure and wealthy not to be open to good ideas," Amy Pascal, the chairman of Sony's Motion Picture Group, says. He has always taken the long view: when he was sent to the principal's office on the first day of first grade for chewing gum, he remembers thinking, Well, there goes college.

At this meeting, Ramis spoke first. "All the delay means that we won't have snow for a film set on a snowy Christmas Eve," he said. "So I was picturing a credit sequence that starts on a crèche, and a raindrop hits the baby, and then more rain, then you cut to a Santa ringing his bell and holding an umbrella, cut to a frozen wreath, and you're getting the idea of a really soggy and depressing Christmas."

"So if it's rain, you're thinking of a different title?" a producer asked.

"If there's no ice, it's hard to call the film 'The Ice Harvest,' " Ramis said. "I was thinking of 'Nothing Like Christmas.' " There was a silence, and Ramis appeared to consider whether it was worth explaining the double meaning—both a nod to and a sardonic distancing from the holiday—but then he shrugged.

A Focus vice-president cautiously mentioned another issue. "We've talked with John"—Cusack—"and he has a concern with the ending." In the script, Charlie finally gets away with the money, and then is run over by an R.V.

"Everyone feels that if Charlie dies it's like the punch line to a shaggy-dog story, and if he lives it shouldn't be redemptive—he should lose the money," Ramis said. (He had told me earlier, "My instinct is to shoot both ways, and, if one is not demonstrably better, to test both. The cosmic fuck-you of him dying works intellectually, but John Cusack is very appealing, so you're not going to want him to die. I'd better be covered.") Ramis continued, "In general, John feels that Charlie seems a little reactive and weak, and he thinks that Charlie's relationship with Renata"—the female lead—"seems mysterious, and that he should have a private, intimate moment with her earlier in the film. These all seem not unreasonable." Cusack's notes were, in fact, entirely foreseeable: stars always want to look as active and funny and sexy as possible.

As a director, Ramis isn't known for adventurous camerawork. Rather, he has a natural ability to make actors funnier. Although never a star himself, he creates and burnishes stars, imbuing them with confidence. Coming from a background in improv, he views a screenplay as just a set of notes toward a performance. When he was preparing to direct the 1999 comedy "Analyze This," about a neurotic Mob boss (Robert De Niro) who invades the life of a therapist (Billy Crystal), Ramis told De Niro that his character was motivated by "anxiety, rage, grief, and guilt."

He gave Billy Crystal different notes. "Bob and I were trains coming from totally different tracks," Crystal says. "There were times when I thought the film was becoming too gangstery, and times when Bob thought it was too funny. We were like pit bulls on Harold's pant leg."

De Niro says, "Harold was good at saying yes to me, and yes to Billy, and yes to Jane and yes to Paula"—the film's producers—"and then figuring out what *he* wanted to do."

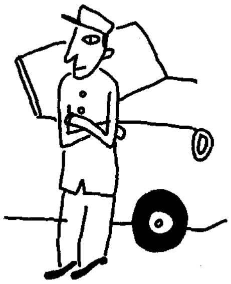
Ultimately, though, Ramis ended up sharing Crystal's view. He told me, "You have to decide who you're making the movie for, and that's . . ." He paused, considering. "I don't want to say the lowest common denominator, but the biggest audience you can get. I've had a lot of people tell me they loved 'Analyze This' until Billy Crystal does shtick pretending to be a mobster"—all improvised—"and that's where we lost them. If the audience is divided, *I* have to cast the winning vote, and it's always been comedy first with me, even at the expense of story or continuity." He believes in testing a film with preview audiences, cutting bits that don't score well, and devising "scene enhancements"—reshoots—to plug the resulting holes.

Ramis admits to having had misgivings about a sequence he cut from his 2000 film "Bedazzled," a mediocrity in the Ramis canon. Preview audiences rejected the bit, in which Brendan Fraser, playing a nerd who is given seven wishes by the Devil, wishes he were a rock star. "Brendan thought it was his best work; he cried when we cut it," Ramis said, cuing up the scene for me on his office television. We watched Fraser being idolized onstage, staggering around backstage and nuzzling his extremely stoned girlfriend,

"I do—but it might just be the liquor talking."

and finally vomiting on his drummer. Ramis looked on, without expression. "Not funny!" he said, when it was over. "Interesting. It's awful!" He seemed strangely pleased: the scene's wretchedness reaffirmed his faith in the audience.

One afternoon, Ramis and I went to visit his eighty-eight-year-old father, Nate, who lives in an apartment in Northbrook, fifteen minutes away from his son. Sitting erect in an armchair, Nate Ramis said, "I like to tell jokes, to balance my insecurity." He added, "I don't think Harold has any insecurities." Ramis, who was paging through one of the fifteen scrapbooks that his father has devoted to him, cleared his throat softly—his father is quite hard of hearing—and rolled his eyes.



Nate and his wife, Ruth, who died a few years ago, ran a store called the Ace Food & Liquor Mart, on the West Side of Chicago. Nate said that Harold was never the rebellious sort. "We always got along great," he said. "We had a ten-inch Philco set, and I'd sit on the chair and the two boys would sit on the arms, and we'd watch the Marx Brothers." He thought for a moment. "I've never seen Harold's anger. Never."

"Not that they'd know," Ramis murmured. In fact, Ramis conducts secret vendettas against inanimate objects that don't obey him—"Fucking shirt!"—and is prone to road rage.

"He was head and shoulders above me in terms of success and accomplishment," Nate continued. Ramis kept quiet, for once, acknowledging his masterliness. He completes the Sunday *Times* crossword in twenty minutes and beats the computer at Scrabble; is a skilled fencer and ritual drummer (his living room is filled with djembes, dunduns, congas, and tom-toms); plays a set of eight songs a day on his acoustic guitar; can tie a monkey-fist knot; speaks Greek to the owners of his local coffee shop; taught himself to ski by watching skiers on TV; makes his own hats out of felted fleece; and is prepared, and even eager, should the occasion arise, to perform an emergency tracheotomy.

"I have this need to keep impressing people—and myself," Ramis told me. " 'God, he can play the guitar *and* wield a sword!' " He chuckled, a mournful "eh, heh." "I always wanted to experience everything—to be a millionaire by the time I was forty, to be Cary Grant and Errol Flynn, to conquer every woman and have her fall in love with me, to be President, to succeed in every conceivable way that our society has to offer." He delights in being recognized, a form of attention that has only increased since 1996, when he moved back to Chicago's North Shore from Brentwood to be near his aging parents. "In Los Angeles, Steven Spielberg walks in and you're nothing," Ramis says. "Here, there's nobody better than me. There's a few Bulls around, and the Cusacks, but, basically, I'm it!"

At the age of seven, Ramis began working in the family store on weekends, and he and his older brother used their bar-mitzvah money to buy their parents new wall-to-wall carpeting. Though he listed his life ambition in his high-school yearbook as "neurosurgeon," as an undergraduate at Washington University in St. Louis he shunned organic chemistry and began writing parodic plays. "In my heart, I felt I was a combination of Groucho and Harpo," Ramis says, "of Groucho using his wit as a weapon against the upper classes, and of Harpo's antic charm and the fact that he was oddly sexy—he grabs women, pulls their skirts off, and gets away with it."

After college, Ramis avoided service in Vietnam by checking every box on the Army's medical-history form, claiming to suffer from conditions ranging from night sweats and bed-wetting to homosexuality. Having escaped the war abroad, he married Anne Plotkin, an artist he'd met in San Francisco. He was twenty-two and quite unprepared for domestic drama. Anne would do things like fly to Bulgaria on a whim to find a Bulgarian psychic to teach them French, or slap Ramis just to gauge his reaction. She likes to recall the time a soap bubble from the sink glistened on their wall for three miraculous days. She told me, "I consider that one of the high points of our marriage."

In 1969, after they moved to Chicago, Ramis was chosen for the cast of the Second City theatre. One of the theatre's precepts was "Always work from the top of your intelligence," and Ramis felt right at home. Then, one evening the following year, he and his wife dropped acid. "I remember seeing Harold as an amoeba, this amoeba with big ideas," Anne Ramis recalled. "I was having a really bad trip." Ramis called a local clown named Corky, who had a sideline in LSD rescue, and Corky suggested making Anne drink maple syrup. Giddy with sugar, Anne decided that she and Harold should move to the Greek island of Hydra. Ramis marched straight to Lincoln Park, where Bernie Sahlins, the co-founder of Second City, walked his terriers every morning at dawn. When Sahlins arrived, Ramis told him he was going to leave Second City. "It embarrasses me to go out there every night begging for the audience's approval," he said. "I don't want to vest my self-esteem in the approval of strangers."

"Well, you can leave," Sahlins said, "but I think you'll find that those feelings have nothing to do with the theatre."

When he was younger, Ramis envisioned himself playing Gary Cooper parts: strong, silent leading men. Instead, his most recent role, in 2002, was a cameo in "Orange County," as a dean of admissions, a cranky figure who turns wide-eyed and cuddly after accidentally ingesting three hits of Ecstasy. The script called for the drugged dean to offer to perform oral sex on a prospective student, but Ramis wanted the scene rewritten so that he just kisses the boy: "I didn't want to be walking down the street and have school buses of kids rolling by and shouting, 'Hey, Blow-Job Guy!' "

When Ramis returned to Second City, in 1972, he had been replaced in the cast by John Belushi. "Harold would never make a fool of himself onstage—he was too smart," Betty Thomas, the director and Second City alumna, said. "But making a fool of himself was exactly what John went for."

"It was like, I'm not the zany, the stoned hippie crazy guy anymore. John is, and he's crazier than I am—he's totally inhabiting these characters," Ramis said. "In the midst of a scene, John would come out with something like 'Eat a bowl of fuck.' "

In 1974, Belushi, who loved having Ramis as his deadpan foil, brought him—and several other Second City actors, including Bill Murray—to New York to work on "The National Lampoon Radio Hour" and "The National Lampoon Show." Ramis slowly came to accept his role as the whetstone. "As a person of intellect, I could complement John or Bill, who were people of instinct; I could help guide and deploy that instinct," he says. Even now, Martin Short told me, if someone in a group of comedians cracks a joke, "everyone skirts their eyes over to Harold first, to see if he laughs."

As Belushi and other Second City actors were becoming famous on "Saturday Night Live," Ramis began writing what would become "National Lampoon's Animal House" with Doug Kenney, one of the founders of *National Lampoon*. (A third writer, Chris Miller, soon joined them.) They were paid ten thousand dollars each and wrote eight hours a day for three months. Ramis took the lead in constructing the script, but its tone owed a lot to Kenney, a sarcastic Harvard graduate who became Ramis's constant companion. "Doug was the Wasp me, the me with alcoholism thrown in," Ramis says. "He used to say that 'just because something's popular doesn't mean it's bad,' which I really took to heart, because my stance had always been that people are idiots and sheep. Our other motto was 'Broad comedy is not necessarily dumb comedy.' Doug envisioned 'Animal House' and, later, 'Caddyshack' as edgy, adult Disney films. He understood that if you make it look like Disney and feel like Disney, and then inject a much edgier message, you have a way of reaching people without threatening them."

Crude as "Animal House" was, it was also rambunctiously optimistic. By setting the film in the early sixties, the writers tapped the source of their earliest ideals. "Our generation's revolutionary energy had slipped away after Kent State and the rise of the violent fringe of the Weather Underground," Ramis says. "We revived it." They revived it by making their obvious outsiders into not so obvious insiders. "Woody Allen had defined the American nebbish as a loser," Ramis adds. "But we felt instinctively that our outsiders weren't losers. They may not achieve anything in the traditional sense—they may not even be smart—but they're countercultural heroes. The movie went on after the credits to tell you that these were your future leaders, while the guys from the 'good' frat would be raped in prison and fragged by their own troops."

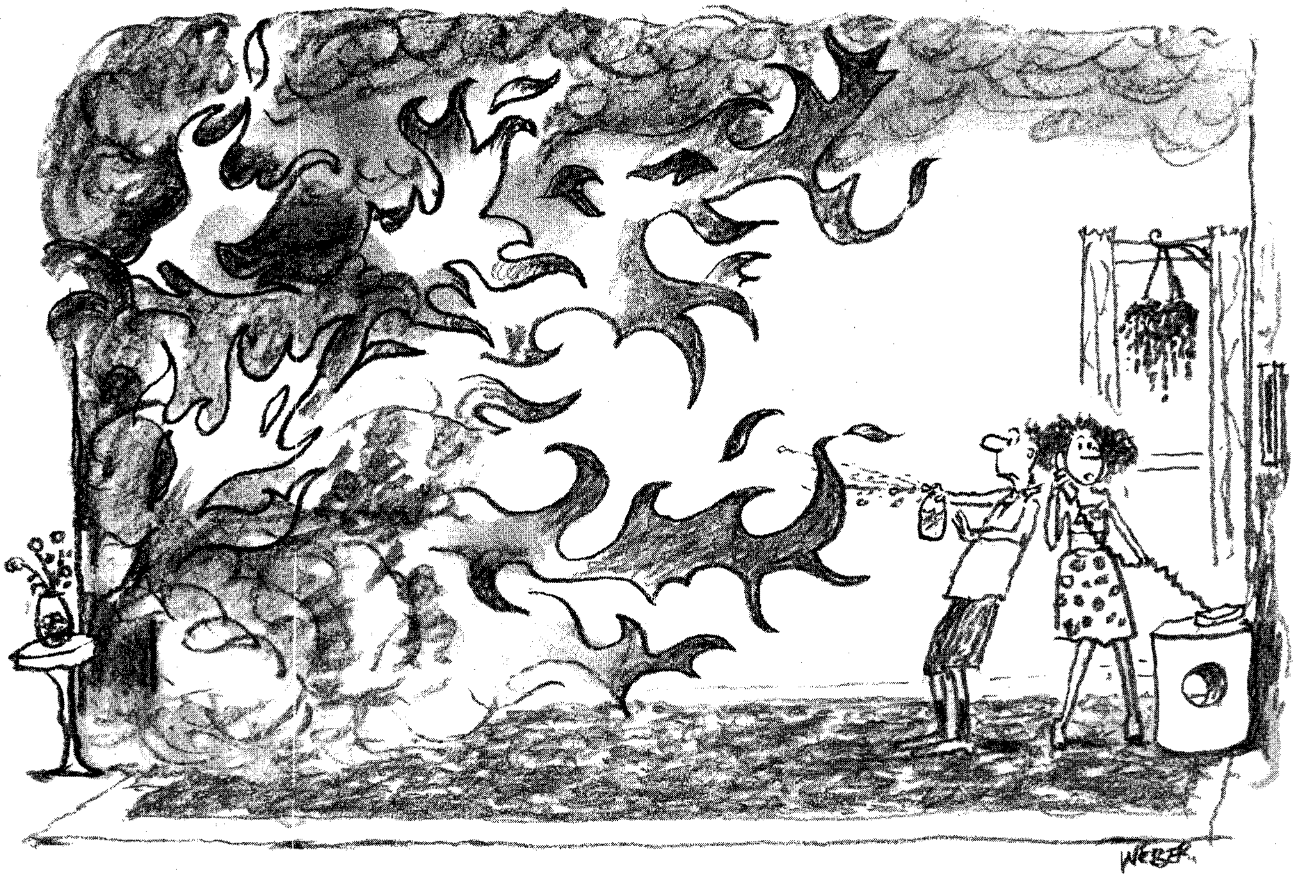
Ramis describes Doug Kenney as the only person he knew who would hit the accelerator if he saw a car crossing his path. When they wrote "Caddyshack" together, along with Bill Murray's older brother, Brian Doyle-Murray, Kenney was using a lot of cocaine and seemed depressed. In July, 1980, after becoming so hostile at the "Caddyshack" press junket that the film's publicists asked him to leave, Kenney took a vacation on the Hawaiian island of Kauai and disappeared. When his body was found, under Hanapepe Lookout, a few days later, it was Ramis who delivered the verdict that everyone repeated: "Doug probably fell while he was looking for a place to jump."

Ramis had always been his circle's designated driver, the guy who, as Dan Aykroyd says, "after the all-night drunk, announces, 'That was fun, but now we've got to take the cars out of the pool.' " But Ramis couldn't save John Belushi, either. After Belushi died, of an overdose, in 1982, he was buried on Martha's Vineyard in a March blizzard. His widow, Judy, asked Ramis to deliver a eulogy at the grave. Trying to make himself heard above the press helicopters circling overhead, Ramis spoke about a Second City bit that featured Belushi as the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation, wearing a First World War flying helmet and a tiny pair of wings that would bounce, just so, as he tiptoed across the stage. "That's a part of John a lot of people never saw, or forgot," Ramis told the mourners, "and that's how I'm seeing him now, that wonderful delicacy of spirit."

Remembering that day, Ramis's expression flickered before recomposing itself as he described the funeral's dénouement: "John's mother, one of the sourest women I've ever met, came up to me at the reception and said, 'You spoke at the grave.' 'Yes, I did.' And she went, 'Ennh.' "

As "The Ice Harvest" 's pre-production meeting continued, Ramis turned to casting the role of Pete, an alcoholic who is married to Charlie's ex-wife. Ramis reported that John Cusack

"Bad dog."



"This woman at 911 is very snippy."

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"likes the names Oliver Platt, Stanley Tucci, and John C. Reilly." He added, "But I'd like to take one shot at Bill Murray. He'd be great as Pete." Seeing a circle of doubtful faces, he continued, "And he could also play Gerard"—the jaded boss from whom Charlie embezzles.

"But would he do it for the love of the movie?" a Focus executive wondered, alluding to Murray's high salary and the film's tight budget—before adding, politely, "I'm sure you have a personal connection."

"No," Ramis said evenly. "I don't. I don't even have Bill's phone number. But I just talked to him eight years ago." Everyone laughed, and several of the producers began trading stories about Murray's legendary elusiveness. Ramis, who has plenty of his own stories—Murray is godfather to his daughter—kept silent.

A few days earlier, he'd told me, "I had a dream that Bill was going to be in 'The Ice Harvest.' I felt really relieved and confident. In comedy, we're out there alone, and it turns out I don't want to work alone—Bill was a tremendous source of strength and protection. If a scene didn't work, I'd just say, 'O.K., let's start lighting,' and Bill and I would talk for half an hour, and we'd get something great." The classic "Cinderella story" speech from "Caddyshack" had been written as an interstitial camera shot: Murray's character, the greenskeeper, was to be "absently lopping the heads off bedded tulips as he practices his golf swing with a grass whip." Ramis took Murray aside and said, "When you're playing sports, do you ever just talk to yourself like you're the announcer?"

Murray said, "Say no more," and did his monologue in one take. As he lops the flowers in the finished film, he shyly mutters, "What an incredible Cinderella story—this unknown comes out of nowhere to lead the pack at Augusta. . . . Tears in his eyes, I guess. . . . This crowd has gone deathly silent. A Cinderella story, out of nowhere, a former greenskeeper now about to become the Masters champion." He swings, then follows the flight of the imaginary shot. "It looks like a mirac— It's in the hole!"

When Ivan Reitman was planning to direct "Stripes," in 1980, he was working from an undistinguished script written for Cheech and Chong. He wanted Bill Murray as his star, and he knew precisely how to get him. "I thought, Harold is my secret weapon," Reitman says. "Bill is this great improv player, but he needs Harold, the focussed composer who understands setting a theme and the rules of orchestration. So I told Harold, 'One, I want you to co-star in my movie, and, two, I want you to rewrite it for two really intelligent guys—you and Bill.' "

Ramis said yes, of course, and so did Murray. Ramis prefers rewriting to facing the blank page, and finds it easier to rewrite a bad script than a good one. "Sometimes I think writers are afraid to invest in what their project is really about," Ramis says. "I'm often willing to be truer to the original concept than the original writer was."

A few years later, when Reitman was thinking of directing Dan Aykroyd's

"Ghostbusters" script, he suggested that they ask Ramis to join the cast—and to do a rewrite with Aykroyd that would play to Murray's strengths. "Harold added the irony, the heart, the romance with Sigourney Weaver, and all the adult writing, as well as the structure," Aykroyd says. "And he knew which passes to throw Bill, so Bill would look funny throughout."

At Forty One North, "The Ice Harvest" 's producers tacitly dropped the idea of casting Bill Murray and reached a consensus that John C. Reilly would make a great Pete. "He wants to be gone to first," an executive said. "I think we lose him if we go to Oliver Platt first, but we don't lose Oliver if we go to John first."

"Let's do that, then," Ramis said. "And I'll try Bill for Gerard."

"Is Bill worth the trouble?" someone asked.

Ramis looked pained. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah. But I'd like to take one shot."

On May 15, 1984, Harold Ramis wrote two words in capital letters on a red index card and taped the card to the inside of a kitchen cabinet in the house that he and Anne shared in Santa Monica. Anne Ramis has preserved the memento in situ, and with a faint smile she opened the cabinet door to show me its message: "NEW LIFE."

"That resolution was inspired by a combination of marital discontent and being hung over in some way," Ramis says. "The image I was cultivating was Last Man Standing, but I realized I felt sick most of the time, that anhedonia had set in, just as it did with Doug near the end." Ramis left Anne, forswore drugs and, later, cigarettes, and, in 1989, married Erica Mann, his former assistant. Erica and her mother had both spent time at Buddhist retreats, and Ramis began to move in that direction. "I'm Buddh-ish," he likes to say, acknowledging that he has been unable to divest himself of "sarcasm, cruelty, self-indulgence, and torpor." He developed a laminated "5 minute Buddhist" card that he hands out, enjoying the joke of presenting the path to salvation—"The Four Sublime States," "The Five Hindrances"—as if it were a Chinese menu.

When the script for "Groundhog Day," by a writer named Danny Rubin, came along, in 1991, Ramis was ready for the next phase of his career: the "redemption comedies." (His later films about a man's search for meaning include "Multiplicity," "Analyze This," and "Bedazzled.") Rubin's script about Phil the weatherman was smart and unusual, but his ending was a cosmic irony of a sort that, in Ramis's experience, audiences dislike: Rita, Phil's producer and love interest, reveals that she's trapped in her own endless repetition, and that there's no existential relief in sight.

About midway through Rubin's original draft, Phil realizes what he really wants:

PHIL VOICE OVER
And me and Rita—together—was the most obvious thing in the world . . .

PHIL
Have you ever felt like you were reliving the same day over and over again?

RITA
Like déjà vu?

PHIL
More like—déjà, déjà, déjà, déjà . . .

RITA
So, you still think you've been here before?

PHIL nods.

RITA
And how does this evening turn out?

PHIL
I'll tell you what I do know. Even in a day as long as this, even in a lifetime of endless repetition, there's still room for possibilities.

Ramis made Phil less homiletic and more charmingly hopeful, and had Rita lay out the road map for how Phil needed to change.

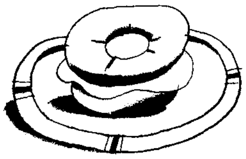
PHIL
What are you looking for? Who's your perfect guy?

RITA
Well. First of all, he's too humble to know he's perfect.

PHIL
That's me.

RITA
He's intelligent, supportive, funny.

PHIL
Intelligent, supportive, funny. Me, me, me.



RITA
(thinking)
He's romantic and courageous.

PHIL
Me, me also.

RITA
He has a good body but he doesn't have to look in the mirror every two minutes.

PHIL
I have a great body and I never look at it.

RITA
He's kind and sensitive and gentle and considerate. And he's not afraid to cry in front of me.

PHIL
This is a *man* we're talking about, right?

By pointing up Phil's smugness and the way he uses humor to keep people at a distance, Ramis's rewrite, which brought Bill Murray aboard, turned Phil into a classic comic hero: a man in need of comeuppance. Rubin says, "Harold built it into a three-act studio movie by giving it a very clear arc: 'This is the worst day of Phil's life. What would make it even worse? Repeating it every day.' "

Phil is ultimately unable to impress Rita with his accomplishments—he learns to play the piano, speak French, and sculpt ice—and wins her over only when he stops trying, when he begins to care about helping other people. The movie became not only a hit but also a touchstone for rabbis, Zen masters, and psychoanalysts.

Offscreen, Ramis and Bill Murray were trapped in a cycle of personal strains. Murray's marriage was breaking up, and he was behaving erratically—the whirling, unpredictable personality that Dan Aykroyd calls "the Murricane." Ramis sent Rubin to New York to work with Murray on the script, because he was tired of taking his star's 2 A.M. calls. Rubin says that when Ramis phoned him to check in, Murray would shake his head and mouth the words "I'm not here." "They were like two brothers who weren't getting along," Rubin says. "And they were pretty far apart on what the movie was about—Bill wanted it to be more philosophical, and Harold kept reminding him it was a comedy."

"At times, Bill was just really irrationally mean and unavailable; he was constantly late on set," Ramis says. "What I'd want to say to him is just what we tell our children: 'You don't have to throw tantrums to get what you want. Just say what you want.' "

After the film wrapped, Murray stopped speaking to Ramis. Some of the pair's friends believe that Murray resents how large a role Ramis had in creating the Murray persona. Michael Shamberg, a Hollywood producer who has known Ramis since college and who used to let Murray sleep on his couch, says, "Bill owes everything to Harold, and he probably has a thimbleful of gratitude."

Except for brief exchanges at a wake and a bar mitzvah, the two men haven't talked in eleven years. "It's a huge hole in my life," Ramis says, "but there are so many pride issues about reaching out. Bill would give you his kidney if you needed it, but he wouldn't necessarily return your phone calls."

In early March, Ramis prevailed on Brian Doyle-Murray to ask his brother if he would take part in "The Ice Harvest." Brian reported that Bill said no, thanks. When Ramis asked if Bill had said anything more, anything personal, Brian said that his brother hadn't mentioned Ramis at all.

At around the same time, I reached Murray, after several attempts, and told him that I was writing about Ramis and would love to talk to him. "Really?" Murray said. It was hard to tell what he meant by that "really." He suggested that I call back in a week. When I did, he said, "I've thought about it, and I really don't have anything to say."

One evening this winter, Ramis and his wife and their sons—Julian, thirteen, and Daniel, nine—were having dinner at a Ruth's Chris Steak House in Northbrook.

"How did things go in school?" Ramis asked Daniel, grinning. That morning, when the boy expressed concern that he'd get yelled at for being late, Ramis had said, "If your teacher says anything, you say, 'You know why I didn't wear a belt today? So I could get my pants down to make it easier for you to kiss my ass.' " Erica gasped and said, "Oh, Harold!" Ramis explained, "It's like Viktor Frankl's idea of paradoxical intention—it's clear he shouldn't actually do it, but suggesting it is empowering." Ramis's sarcasm, once the epitome of generation-gap-creating behavior, has become a parenting style.

Ramis and Daniel exchanged a few classic jokes. "Then, there's the two-suppositories joke," Daniel said.

"Oh, *Daniel*," Erica said.

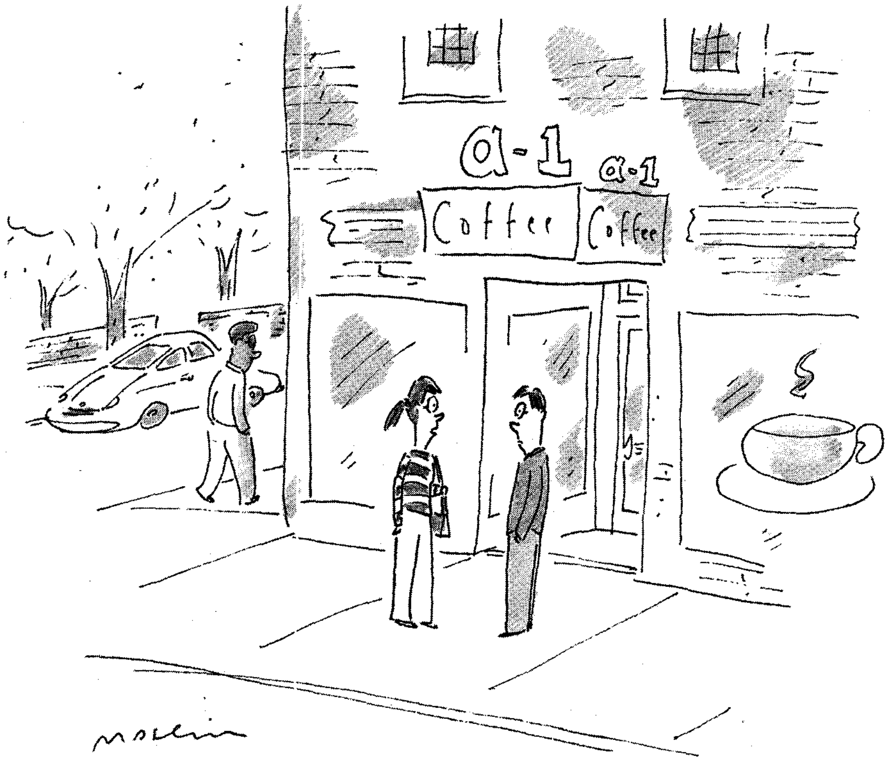
"Go ahead," Ramis urged. Daniel told it well, tossing off the punch line: "For all the good they did me, I might as well have shoved them up my ass."

Ramis laughed. "I thought you were going to say 'butt.' "

"It's better with 'ass.' " Ramis glanced at his wife, who was trying to look disapproving, as if to say, "Kid's got a point."

Later, in his office, Ramis told me, "It's a birth-order thing. As the younger son, Daniel needs to win everybody, to be funny, as I did." I asked him about an observation that the director Jake Kasdan had made to me: that Ramis seems to move through life with a thought bubble over his head that says, "Can you believe we're getting away with this?" He said, "Part of it is, Hey, we're in a movie! How cool is this! And then the other joke is the big joke of life, the ultimate irony that none of it means anything, that it's all ridiculous—whatever we think is important isn't. We're standing here on a set talking intensely, like it really matters, we're spending a zillion dollars, two hundred people are standing around waiting for us, and we're arguing about what's the funniest candy bar."

He chuckled. After a moment, he said, "Sometimes what people perceive as my smile is a grimace of pain. At this point, it's a mask, like the Joker in 'Batman.' My face is a frozen mask."



"I don't think we should see each other anymore, Kevin—except at home."

Violet Ramis, who is now twenty-seven, seems nostalgic for her father's passionate youth. "I'll say, 'Now that you're rich, you can do an indie film and say what you really want,' " Violet told me. "And he'll say, 'But the problem with indies is bad craft services' "—that is, bad catering. "He likes that I've picked up the torch of his ideals, but he also gets mad—partly because he knows what I'm saying is true, but partly because I'm living off him. And he'll say, 'I hope you'll tell your boys not to burn my house down when the revolution starts.' "

Ramis was never a revolutionary; he was a satirist. Where revolutionaries have ideals, satirists have targets, and those targets shift and blur if the satirist falls prey to empathy. Satire is a tool of the young, who can't conceive that the chairman of G.E. might be gentle with his children and kind to his dog. When he was writing and co-starring in "Stripes," Ramis says, "My whole problem was, We're doing an Army movie and we're not going to talk about Vietnam? What can I put in this movie to convey my antiwar sentiments?" In the end, after filming at Fort Knox and coming to admire some of the local Army personnel, Ramis says, "We did it when Bill says, 'We've been kicking ass for two hundred years—we're ten and one!' *That* was my reference to Vietnam."

Ramis wants to believe that his films have affected social attitudes. "People hear a character like Bill's in 'Stripes,' and they're emboldened to think, I can say these things, I can use them as modes of operating in the world. Of course," he acknowledges, "our movies haven't ended war or defeated the Republican Party or inspired huge strides in social justice. By allowing people to laugh at injustice or hypocrisy, satirical comedy enables them to feel like they've done something: I'm cool, I get what's wrong with that. That self-satisfaction works against activism, so satirical comedy might actually be counterproductive."

The voice that Ramis originated—a defanged sixties rebelliousness that doesn't so much seek to oust the powerful as to embolden the powerless—remains the dominant mode in comedy today. "The ideas behind most comedies now—put the underdog in the corner and let him win, the marriage of comedy and anarchy in a single molecule, and having characters do all these unlikable things but remain completely winning—are all Harold's," Brian Grazer, the producer, says. "He is the father of the modern Hollywood comedy." "Animal House" was thoroughly ripped off by the "Porky's" series, the "Revenge of the Nerds" series, and "Old School." "Caddyshack" was ripped off by "Happy Gilmore," "Ghostbusters" by "Men in Black," and "Groundhog Day" by the current Adam Sandler comedy "50 First Dates."

A rule of thumb in the comedy world is that social attitudes change every four years. A comedy director can keep pace for only so long. Preston Sturges had seven straight hits, ending with "Hail the Conquering Hero," in 1944, did solid work through "Unfaithfully Yours," in 1948, and then more or less vanished from the screen. Billy Wilder directed back-to-back classics in 1959 and 1960—"Some Like It Hot" and "The Apartment"—worked at a lesser level through "The Fortune Cookie," in 1966, and then petered out. Now some of Ramis's colleagues are wondering about his future. "Harold should have moved on from 'Groundhog Day,' " one of his friends says. "I mean, Einstein didn't keep postulating all the other things that *E* was equal to. But maybe he doesn't have that much else to say."

Ramis's lack of much else to say may in fact explain his longevity. He has produced hits for more than twenty years by being the opposite of an auteur: by channelling and focussing prevailing opinion. Ramis told me, "I'm sure my agents think of 'Ice Harvest' as a departure that will announce to the industry, 'He can do a whole new thing!' " He chuckled. "Well, maybe I can't. Maybe I fuck it up."

W. Hamilton

"She said Africa was a life-changing experience, but I haven't noticed any change."

• •

One afternoon, Ramis and I had lunch at a tavern near his office. He began talking about another star of his early films, Chevy Chase. "Do you know the concept of proprioception, of how you know where you are and where you're oriented?" he asked. "Chevy lost his sense of proprioception, lost touch with what he was projecting to people. It's strange, but you couldn't write Chevy as a character in a novel, because his whole attitude is just superiority: 'I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not.' "

Ramis said that he identified with Nathan Zuckerman, the alter ego in many of Philip Roth's novels: "Watching other people having experiences I'm not going to have. But understanding, empathizing. Much as I want to be a protagonist, it doesn't happen, somehow. I'm missing some tragic element or some charisma, or something. Weight. Investment."

After a moment, he continued, "One of my favorite Bill Murray stories is one about when he went to Bali. I'd spent three weeks there, mostly in the south, where the tourists are. But Bill rode a motorcycle into the interior until the sun went down and got totally lost. He goes into a village store, where they are very surprised to see an American tourist, and starts talking to them in English, going 'Wow! Nice hat! Hey, gimme that hat!' " Ramis's eyes were lighting up. "And he took the guy's hat and started imitating people, entertaining. Word gets around this hamlet that there's some crazy guy at the grocery, and he ended up doing a dumb show with the whole village sitting around laughing as he grabbed the women and tickled the kids. No worry about getting back to a hotel, no need for language, just his presence, and his charisma, and his courage. When you meet the hero, you sure know it."

He smiled. "Bill loves to get lost, to throw the map out the window and drive till you have no idea where you are, just to experience something new." And you? "Oh, I'd be the one with the map. I'm the map guy. I'm the one saying to Bill, 'You know, we should get back now. They're going to be looking for us.' " ♦

FICTION

CAT 'N' MOUSE

BY STEVEN MILLHAUSER

The cat is chasing the mouse through the kitchen: between the blue chair legs, over the tabletop with its red-and-white checkered tablecloth that is already sliding in great waves, past the sugar bowl falling to the left and the cream jug falling to the right, over the blue chair back, down the chair legs, across the waxed and butter-yellow floor. The cat and the mouse lean backward and try to stop on the slippery wax, which shows their flawless reflections. Sparks shoot from their heels, but it's much too late: the big door looms. The mouse crashes through, leaving a mouse-shaped hole. The cat crashes through, replacing the mouse-shaped hole with a larger, cat-shaped hole. In the living room, they race over the back of the couch, across the piano keys (delicate mouse tune, crash of cat chords), along the blue rug. The fleeing mouse snatches a glance over his shoulder, and when he looks forward again he sees the floor lamp coming closer and closer. Impossible to stop—at the last moment, he splits in half and rejoins himself on the other side. Behind him the rushing cat fails to split in half and crashes into the lamp: his head and body push the brass pole into the shape of a trombone. For a moment, the cat hangs sideways there, his stiff legs shaking like the clapper of a bell. Then he pulls free and rushes after the mouse, who turns and darts into a mousehole in the baseboard. The cat crashes into the wall and folds up like an accordion. Slowly, he unfolds, emitting accordion music. He lies on the floor with his chin on his upraised paw, one eyebrow lifted high in disgust, the claws of his other forepaw tapping the floorboards. A small piece of plaster drops on his head. He raises an outraged eye. A framed painting falls heavily on his head, which plunges out of sight between his shoulders. The painting shows a green tree with bright-red apples. The cat's head struggles to rise, then pops up with the sound of a yanked cork, lifting the picture. Apples fall from the tree and land with a thump on the grass. The cat shudders, winces. A final apple falls. Slowly it rolls toward the frame, drops over the edge, and lands on the cat's head. In the cat's eyes, cash registers ring up "No Sale."

RICHARD McGUIRE

The mouse, dressed in a bathrobe and slippers, is sitting in his plump armchair, reading a book. He is tall and slim. His feet rest on a hassock, and a pair of spectacles rest on the end of his long, whiskered nose. Yellow light from a table lamp pours onto the book and dimly illuminates the cozy brown room. On the wall hang a tilted sampler bearing the words "Home Sweet Home," an oval photograph of the mouse's mother with her gray hair in a bun, and a reproduction of Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon" in which all the figures are mice. Near the armchair is a bookcase filled with books, with several titles visible: "Martin Cheddarwit," Gouda's "Faust," "The Memoirs of Anthony Edam," "A History of the Medicheese," the sonnets of Shakespaw. As the mouse reads his book, he reaches without looking toward a dish on the table. The dish is empty: his fingers tap about inside it. The mouse rises and goes over to the cupboard, which is empty except for a tin box with the word "Cheese" on it. He opens the box and turns it upside down. Into his palm drops a single toothpick. He gives it a melancholy look. Shaking his head, he returns to his chair and takes up his book. In a bubble above his head a picture appears: He is seated at a long table covered with a white tablecloth. He is holding a fork upright in one fist and a knife upright in the other. A mouse butler dressed in tails sets before him a piece of cheese the size of a wedding cake.

From the mousehole emerges a red telescope. The lens looks to the left, then to the right. A hand issues from the end of the telescope and beckons the mouse forward. The mouse steps from the mousehole, collapses the telescope, and thrusts it into his bathrobe pocket. In the moonlit room, he tiptoes carefully, lifting his legs very high, over to the base of the armchair. He dives under the chair and peeks out through the fringe. He emerges from beneath the armchair, slinks over to the couch, and dives under. He peeks out through the fringe. He emerges from beneath the couch and approaches the slightly open kitchen door. He stands flat against the doorjamb, facing the living room, his eyes darting left and right. One leg tiptoes delicately around the jamb. His stretched body snaps after it like a rubber band. In the kitchen, he creeps to a moonlit chair, stands pressed against a chair leg, begins to climb. His nose rises over the tabletop: he sees a cream pitcher, a gleaming knife, a looming pepper mill. On a breadboard sits a wedge of cheese. The mouse, hunching his shoulders, tiptoes up to the cheese. From a pocket of his robe he removes a white handkerchief that he ties around his neck. He bends over the cheese, half closing his eyes, as if he were sniffing a flower. With a crashing sound, the cat springs onto the table. As he chases the mouse, the tablecloth bunches in waves, the sugar bowl topples, and waterfalls of sugar spill to the floor. An olive from a fallen cocktail glass rolls across the table, knocking into a cup, a saltshaker, a trivet: the objects light up and cause bells to ring, as in a pinball machine. On the floor, a brigade of ants is gathering the sugar: one ant catches the falling grains in a bucket, which he dumps into the bucket of a second ant, who dumps the sugar into the bucket of a third ant, all the way across the room, until the last ant dumps it into a waiting truck. The cat chases the mouse over the blue chair back, down the chair legs, across the waxed floor. Both lean backward and try to stop as the big door comes closer and closer.

The mouse is sitting in his armchair with his chin in his hand, looking off into the distance with a melancholy expression. He is thoughtful by temperament, and he is distressed at the necessity of interrupting his meditations for the daily search for food. The search is wearying and absurd in itself, but is made unbearable by the presence of the brutish cat. The mouse's disdain for the cat is precise and abundant: he loathes the soft, heavy paws with their hidden hooks, the glinting teeth, the hot, fish-stinking breath. At the same time, he confesses to himself a secret admiration for the cat's coarse energy and simplicity. It appears that the cat has no other aim in life than to catch the mouse. Although the faculty of astonishment is not highly developed in the mouse, he is constantly astonished by the cat's unremitting enmity. This makes the cat dangerous, despite his stupidity, for the mouse recognizes that he himself has long periods when the cat fades entirely from his mind. Moreover, despite the fundamental simplicity of the cat's nature, it remains true that the cat is cunning: he plots tirelessly against the mouse, and his ludicrous wiles require in the mouse an alert attention that he would prefer not to give. The mouse is aware of the temptation of indifference; he must continually exert himself to be wary. He feels that he is exhausting his

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nerves and harming his spirit by attending to the cat; at the same time, he realizes that his attention is at best imperfect, and that the cat is thinking uninterruptedly, with boundless energy, of him. If only the mouse could stay in his hole, he would be happy, but he cannot stay in his hole, because of the need to find cheese. It is not a situation calculated to produce the peace of mind conducive to contemplation.

The cat is standing in front of the mousehole with a hammer in one hand and a saw in the other. Beside him rests a pile of yellow boards and a big bag of nails. He begins furiously hammering and sawing, moving across the room in a cloud of dust that conceals him. Suddenly, the dust clears and the cat beholds his work: a long, twisting pathway that begins at the mousehole and passes under the couch, over the back of the armchair, across the piano, through the kitchen door, and onto the kitchen table. On the tablecloth, at the end of the pathway, is a large mousetrap on which sits a lump of cheese. The cat tiptoes over to the refrigerator, vanishes behind it, and slyly thrusts out his head: his eyes dart left and right. There is the sound of a bicycle bell: *ring ring*. A moment later, the mouse appears, pedalling fiercely. He speeds from the end of the pathway onto the table. As he screeches to a stop, the round wheels stretch out of shape and then become round again. The mouse is wearing riding goggles, a riding cap, and gloves. He leans his bicycle against the sugar bowl, steps over to the mousetrap, and looks at it with interest. He steps onto the mousetrap, sits down on the brass bar, and puts on a white bib. From a pocket of his leather jacket he removes a knife and fork. He eats the cheese swiftly. After his meal, he replaces the knife and fork in his pocket and begins to play on the mousetrap. He swings on a high bar, hangs upside down by his legs, walks the parallel bars, performs gymnastic stunts. Then he climbs onto his bicycle and disappears along the pathway, ringing his bell. The cat emerges from behind the refrigerator and springs onto the table beside the mousetrap. He frowns down at the trap. From the top of his head he plucks a single hair: it comes loose with the sound of a snapping violin string. Slowly, he lowers the hair toward the mousetrap. The hair touches the spring. The mousetrap remains motionless. He presses the spring with a spoon. The mousetrap remains motionless. He bangs the spring with a sledgehammer. The mousetrap remains motionless. He looks at the trap with rage. Cautiously, he reaches out a single toe. The mousetrap springs shut with the sound of a slammed iron door. The cat hops about the table holding his trapped foot as the toe swells to the size of a light bulb, bright red.

The cat enters on the left, disguised as a mouse. He is wearing a blond wig, a nose mask, and a tight black dress slit to the thigh. He has high and very round breasts, a tiny waist, and round, rolling hips. His lips are bright red, and his black lashes are so tightly curled that when he blinks his eyes the lashes roll out and snap back like window shades. He walks slowly and seductively, resting one hand on a hip and one hand on his blond hair. The mouse is standing in the mousehole, leaning against one side with his hands in his pockets. His eyes protrude from their sockets in the shape of telescopes. In the lens of each telescope is a thumping heart. Slowly, as if mesmerized, the mouse sleepwalks into the room. The cat places a needle on a record, and rumba music begins to play. The cat dances with his hands clasped behind his neck, thrusting out each hip, fluttering his long lashes, turning to face the other way: in the tight black dress, his twitching backside is shaped like the ace of spades. The mouse faces the cat and begins to dance. They stride back and forth across the room, wriggling and kicking in step. As they dance, the cat's wig comes loose, revealing one cat ear. The cat dances over to a bearskin rug and lies down on his side. He closes his long-lashed eyes and purses his red, red lips. The mouse steps up to the cat. He reaches into his pocket, removes a cigar, and places it between the big red lips. The cat's eyes open. They look down at the cigar, look up, and look down again. The cat removes the cigar and stares at it. The cigar explodes. When the smoke clears, the cat's face is black. He gives a strained, very white smile. Many small lines appear in his teeth. The teeth crack into little pieces and fall out.

The cat is lying on his back in his basket in the kitchen. His hands are clasped behind his head, his left knee is raised, and his right ankle rests sideways on the raised knee. He is filled with rage at the thought

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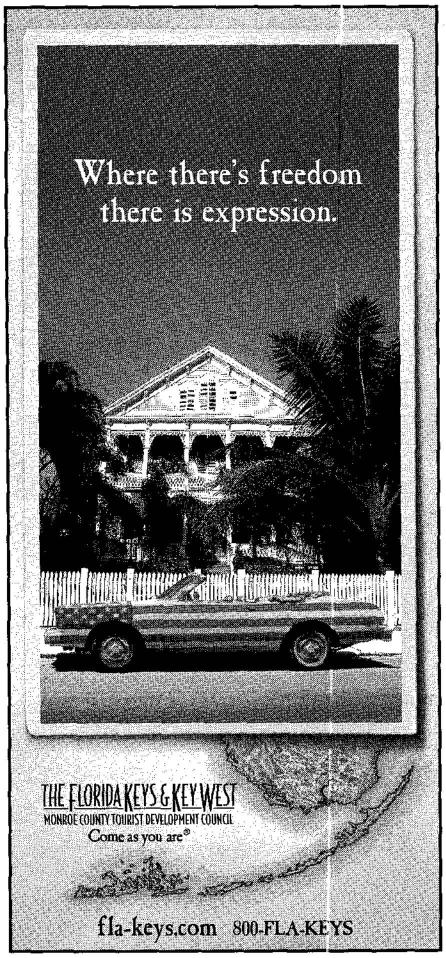
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of the mouse, who he knows despises him. He would like to tear the mouse to pieces, to roast him over a fire, to plunge him into a pan of burning butter. He understands that his rage is not the rage of hunger and he wonders whether the mouse himself is responsible for evoking this savagery, which burns in his chest like indigestion. He despises the mouse's physical delicacy, his weak arms as thin as the teeth of combs, his frail, crushable skull, his fondness for books and solitude. At the same time, he is irritably aware that he admires the mouse's elegance, his air of culture and languor, his easy self-assurance. Why is he always reading? In a sense, the mouse intimidates the cat: in his presence, the cat feels clumsy and foolish. He thinks obsessively about the mouse and suspects with rage that the mouse frequently does not think about him at all, there in his brown room. If the mouse was less indifferent, would he burn with such hatred? Might they learn to live peacefully together in the same house? Would he be released from this pain of outrage in his heart?

The mouse is standing at his workbench, curling the eyelashes of a mechanical cat. Her long black hair is as shiny as licorice; her lips look like licked candy. She is wearing a tight red dress, black fishnet stockings, and red high heels. The mouse stands the mechanical cat on her feet, unzips the back of her dress, and winds a big key. He zips up the dress and aims her toward the mousehole. In the living room, the mechanical cat struts slowly back and forth; her pointy breasts stick out like party hats. The cat's head rises over the back of the armchair. In his eyes appear hearts pierced by arrows. He slithers over the chair and slides along the floor like honey. When he reaches the strutting cat, he glides to an upright position and stands mooning at her. His heart is thumping so hard that it pushes out the skin of his chest with each beat. The cat reaches into a pocket and removes a straw boater, which he places on his head at a rakish angle. He fastens at his throat a large polka-dot bow tie. He becomes aware of a ticking sound. He removes from his pocket a round yellow watch, places it against his ear, frowns, and returns it to his pocket. He bends close to the face of the cat and sees in each of her eyes a shiny round black bomb with a burning fuse. The cat turns to the

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SELF-PORTRAIT IN BED

For imaginary visitors, I had a chair
Made of cane I found in the trash.
There was a hole where its seat was
And its legs were wobbly
But it still gave a dignified appearance.

I myself never sat in it, although
With the help of a pillow one could do that
Carefully, with knees drawn together
The way she did once,
Leaning back to laugh at her discomfort.

The lamp on the night table
Did what it could to bestow
An air of mystery to the room.
There was a mirror, too, that made
Everything waver as in a fishbowl

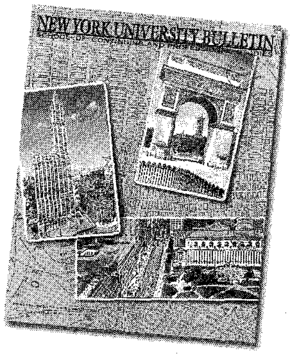
If I happened to look that way,
Red-nosed, about to sneeze,
With a thick wool cap pulled over my ears,
Reading some Russian in bed,
Worrying about my soul, I'm sure.

—*Charles Simic*

audience and then back to the dangerous eyes. The mechanical cat blows up. When the smoke clears, the cat's skin hangs in tatters about him, revealing his raw pink flesh and a pair of polka-dot boxer shorts.

Outside the mousehole, the cat is winding up a mouse that exactly resembles the real mouse. The mechanical mouse is wearing a bathrobe and slippers, stands with hands in pockets, and has a pair of eyeglasses perched at the end of its nose. The cat lifts open the top of the mouse's head, which is attached in the manner of a hinged lid. He inserts a sizzling red stick of dynamite and closes the lid. He sets the mouse in front of the hole and watches as it vanishes through the arched opening. Inside, the mouse is sitting in his chair, reading a book. He does not raise his eyes to the visitor, who glides over with its hands in its pockets. Still reading, the mouse reaches out and lifts open the head of his double. He removes the sizzling dynamite, thrusts it into a cake, and inserts the cake into the mouse's head. He turns the mechanical mouse around and continues reading as it walks out through the arch. The cat is squatting beside the hole with his eyes shut and his fingers pressed in his ears. He opens his eyes and sees the mouse. His eyebrows rise. He snatches up the mouse, opens its head, and lifts out a thickly frosted cake that says "Happy Birthday." In the center of the cake is a sizzling red stick of dynamite. The cat's hair leaps up. He takes a tremendous breath and blows out the fuse with such force that for a moment the cake is slanted. Now the cat grins, licks his teeth, and opens his jaws. He hears a sound. The cake is ticking loudly: *tock tock, tock tock*. Puzzled, the cat holds it up to one ear. He listens closely. A terrible knowledge dawns in his eyes.

The cat rides into the living room in a bright-yellow crane. From the boom hangs a shiny black wrecking ball. He drives up to the mousehole and stops. He pushes and pulls a pair of levers, which cause the wrecking ball to be inserted into a gigantic rubber band attached to a gigantic slingshot. The rubber band stretches back and back. Suddenly, it releases the shiny black ball, which smashes



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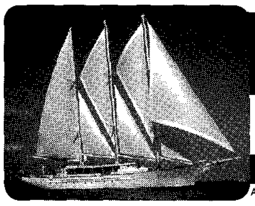

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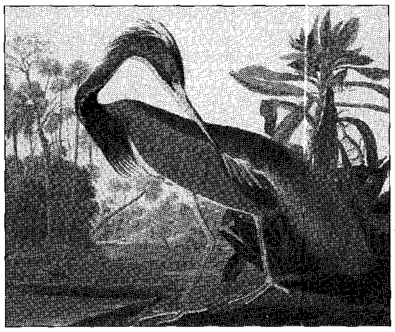

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into the wall. The entire house collapses, leaving only a tall red chimney standing amid the ruins. On top of the chimney is a stork's nest, in which a stork sits with a fishing pole. He is wearing a blue baseball cap. Below, in the rubble, a stirring is visible. The cat rises unsteadily, leaning on a crutch. His head is covered with a white bandage that conceals an eye; one leg is in a cast and one arm in a sling. With the tip of his crutch, he moves away a pile of rubble and exposes a fragment of baseboard. In the baseboard we see the unharmed mousehole. Inside the mousehole, the mouse sits in his chair, reading a book.

The mouse understands that the clownishly inept cat has the freedom to fail over and over again, during the long course of an inglorious lifetime, while he himself is denied the liberty of a single mistake. It is highly unlikely, of course, that he will ever be guilty of an error, since he is much cleverer than the cat and immediately sees through every one of his risible stratagems. Still, might not the very knowledge of his superiority lead to a relaxation of vigilance that will prove fatal, in the end? After all, he is not invulnerable; he is invulnerable only insofar as he is vigilant. The mouse is bored, deeply bored, by the ease with which he outwits the cat; there are times when he longs for a more worthy enemy, someone more like himself. He understands that his boredom is a dangerous weakness against which he must perpetually be on his guard. Sometimes he thinks, If only I could stop watching over myself, if only I could let myself go! The thought alarms him and causes him to look over his shoulder at the mousehole, across which the shadow of the cat has already fallen.

The cat enters from the left, carrying a sack over one shoulder. He sets the sack down beside the mousehole. He unties a rope from the neck of the sack, plunges both hands in, and carefully lifts out a gray cloud. He places the cloud in the air above the mousehole. Rain begins to fall from the cloud, splashing down in great drops. The cat reaches into the sack and removes some old clothes. He swiftly disguises himself as a peddler and rings the mouse's bell. The mouse appears in the arched doorway, leaning against the side with his arms folded across his stomach and his ankles crossed as he stares out at the rain. The cat removes from the sack an array of mouse-size umbrellas, which he opens in turn: red, yellow, green, blue. The mouse shakes his head. The cat removes from the sack a yellow slicker, a pair of hip boots, a fishing rod and tackle box. The mouse shakes his head. The cat removes a red rubber sea horse, a compressed-air tank, a diving bell, a rowboat, a yacht. The mouse shakes his head, steps into his house, and slams the door. He opens the door, hangs a sign on the knob, and slams the door again. The sign reads "Not Home." The rain falls harder. The cat steps out from under the cloud, which rises above his head and begins to follow him about the room. The storm grows worse: he is pelted with hailstones the size of golf balls. In the cloud appear many golfers, driving golf balls into the room. Forked lightning flashes; thunder roars. The cat rushes around the room trying to escape the cloud and dives under the couch. His tail sticks out. Lightning strikes the tail, which crackles like an electric wire. The couch rises for an instant, exposing the luminous, electrified cat rigid with shock; inside the cat's body, with its rim of spiked fur, his blue-white skeleton is visible. Now snow begins to fall from the cloud, and whistling winds begin to blow. Snow lies in drifts on the rug, rises swiftly up the sides of the armchair, sweeps up to the mantelpiece, where the clock looks down in terror and covers its eyes with its hands. The cat struggles slowly through the blizzard but is soon encased in snow. Icicles hang from his chin. He stands motionless, shaped like a cat struggling forward with bent head. The door of the mousehole opens and the mouse emerges, wearing earmuffs, scarf, and gloves. The sun is shining. He begins shovelling a path. When he comes to the snow-cat, he climbs to the top of his shovel and sticks a carrot in the center of the snowy face. Then he climbs down, steps back, and begins throwing snowballs. The cat's head falls off.

The cat is pacing angrily in the kitchen, his hands behind his back and his eyebrows drawn down in a V. In a bubble above his head a wish appears: He is operating a circular saw that moves slowly, with high whining sounds, along a yellow board. At the end of the board is the mouse, lying on his back, tied down with ropes. The image vanishes and is replaced by another: The cat, wearing an engi-

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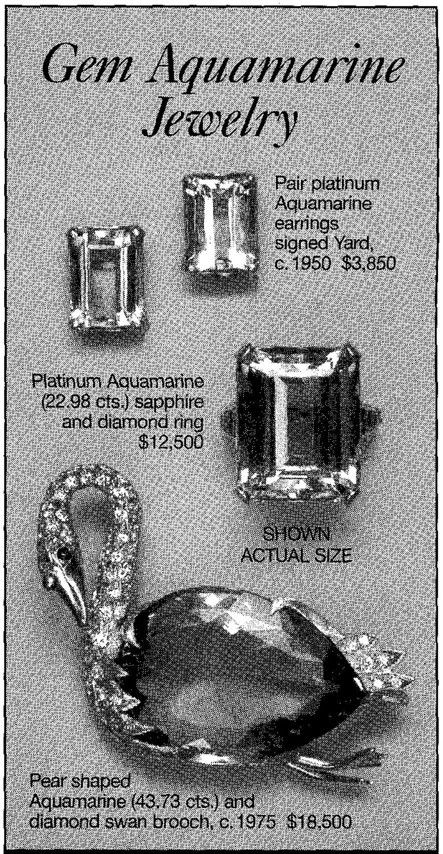
neer's hat, is driving a great train along a track. The mouse is stretched across the middle of the track, his wrists fastened to one rail and his ankles to the other. Sweat bursts in big drops from the mouse's face as the image vanishes and is replaced by another: The cat is turning a winch that slowly lowers an anvil toward the mouse, who is tied to a little chair. The mouse looks up in terror. Suddenly, the cat lets go of the crank and the anvil rushes down with a whistling sound as the winch spins wildly. At the last moment, the mouse tumbles away. The anvil falls through the bubble onto the cat's head.

The cat understands that the mouse will always outwit him, but this tormenting knowledge serves only to inflame his desire to catch the mouse. He will never give up. His life, in relation to the mouse, is one long failure, a monotonous succession of unspeakable humiliations; his unhappiness is relieved only by moments of delusional hope, during which he believes, despite doubts supported by a lifetime of bitter experience, that at last he will succeed. Although he knows that he will never catch the mouse, who will forever escape into his mousehole a half inch ahead of the reaching claw, he also knows that only if he catches the mouse will his wretched life be justified. He will be transformed. Is it therefore his own life that he seeks, when he lies awake plotting against the mouse? Is it, when all is said and done, himself that he is chasing? The cat frowns and scratches his nose.

The cat stands before the mousehole holding in one hand a piece of white chalk. On the blue wall he draws the outline of a large door. The mousehole is at the bottom of the door. He draws the circle of a doorknob and opens the door. He steps into a black room. At the end of the room stands the mouse with a piece of chalk. The mouse draws a white mousehole on the wall and steps through. The cat kneels down and peers into the mousehole. He stands up and draws another door. He opens the door and steps into another black room. At the end of the room stands the mouse, who draws another mousehole and steps through. The cat draws another door, the mouse draws another mousehole. Faster and faster they draw: door, hole, door, hole, door. At the end of the last room,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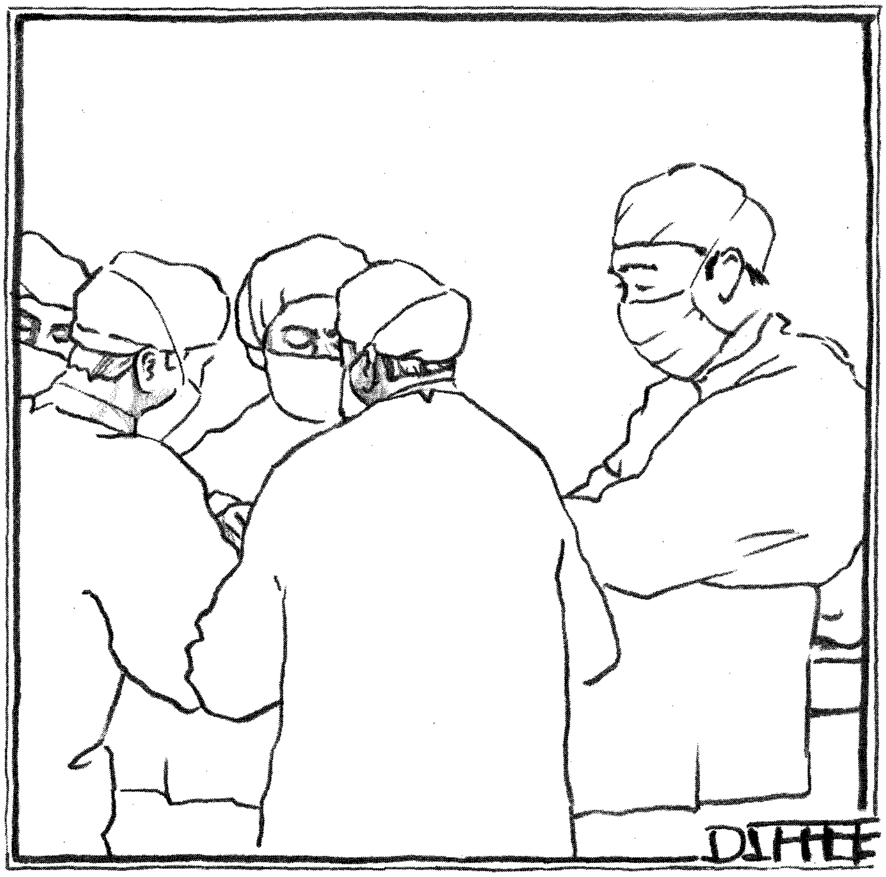

"Try jiggling the liver."

• •

the mouse draws on the wall a white stick of dynamite. He draws a white match, which he takes in his hand and strikes against the wall. He lights the dynamite and hands it to the cat. The cat looks at the white outline of the dynamite. He offers it to the mouse. The mouse shakes his head. The cat points to himself and raises his eyebrows. The mouse nods. The stick of dynamite explodes.

The cat enters on the left, wearing a yellow hard hat and pushing a red wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow is piled high with boards. In front of the mousehole, the cat puts down the handles of the barrow, pulls a hammer and saw from the pile of boards, and thrusts a fistful of black nails between his teeth. He begins sawing and hammering rapidly, moving from one end of the room to the other as a cloud of dust conceals his work. Suddenly, the dust clears and the cat beholds his creation: he has constructed a tall guillotine, connected to the mousehole by a stairway. The blue-black glistening blade hangs between posts high above the opening for the head. Directly below the opening, on the other side, stands a basket. On the rim of the basket the cat places a wedge of cheese. The cat loops a piece of string onto a lever in the side of the guillotine and fastens the other end of the string to the wedge of cheese. Then he tiptoes away with hunched shoulders and vanishes behind a fire shovel. A moment later, the mouse climbs the stairs onto the platform of the guillotine. He stands with his hands in the pockets of his robe and contemplates the blade, the opening for the head, and the piece of cheese. He removes from one pocket a yellow package with a red bow. He leans over the edge of the platform and slips the loop from the lever. He thrusts his head through the head hole, removes the piece of cheese from the rim of the basket, and sets the package in its place. He ties the string to the package, slides his head back through the hole, and fits the loop of the string back over the lever. From his pocket he removes a large pair of scissors, which he lays on the platform. He next removes

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a length of rope, which he fastens to the lever so that the rope hangs nearly to the floor. On the floor, he stands cross-ankled against the wheel of the barrow, eating his cheese. A moment later, the cat leaps onto the platform. He looks up in surprise at the unfallen blade. He crouches down, peers through the head hole, and sees the yellow package. He frowns. He looks up at the blade. He looks at the yellow package. Gingerly, he reaches a paw through the opening and snatches it back. He frowns at the string. A cunning look comes into his eyes. He notices the pair of scissors, picks them up, and cuts the string. He waits, but nothing happens. Eagerly, he thrusts his head through the opening and reaches for the package. The mouse, eating his cheese with one hand, lazily tugs at the rope with the other. The blade rushes down with the sound of a roaring train; a forlorn whistle blows. The cat tries to pull his head out of the hole. The blade slices off the top half of his head, which drops into the basket and rolls noisily around like a coin. The cat pulls himself out of the hole and stumbles about until he falls over the edge of the platform into the basket. He seizes the top of his head and puts it on like a hat. It is backward. He straightens it with a half turn. In his hand, he sees with surprise the yellow package with the red bow. Frowning, he unties it. Inside is a bright-red stick of dynamite with a sizzling fuse. The cat looks at the dynamite and turns his head to the audience. He blinks once. The dynamite explodes. When the smoke clears, the cat's face is black. In each eye a ship cracks in half and slowly sinks in the water.

The mouse is sitting in his chair with his feet on the hassock and his open book face down on his lap. A mood of melancholy has invaded him, as if the brown tones of his room had seeped into his brain. He feels stale and out of sorts: he moves within the narrow compass of his mind, utterly devoid of fresh ideas. Is he perhaps too much alone? He thinks of the cat and wonders whether there is some dim and distant possibility of a connection, perhaps a companionship. Is it possible that they might become friends? Perhaps he could teach the cat to appreciate the things of the mind, and learn from the cat to enjoy life's simpler pleasures. Perhaps the cat, too, feels an occasional sting of loneliness. Haven't they much in common, after all? Both are bachelors, indoor sorts, who enjoy the comforts of a cozy domesticity; both are secretive; both take pleasure in plots and schemes. The more the mouse pursues this line of thought, the more it seems to him that the cat is a large, soft mouse. He imagines the cat with mouse ears and gentle mouse paws, wearing a white bib, sitting across from him at the kitchen table, lifting to his mouth a fork at the end of which is a piece of cheese.

The cat enters from the right with a chalkboard eraser in one hand. He goes over to the mousehole, bends down, and erases it. He stands up and erases the wall, revealing the mouse's home. The mouse is sitting in his chair with his feet on the hassock and his open book face down on his lap. The cat bends over and erases the book. The mouse looks up in irritation. The cat erases the mouse's chair. He erases the hassock. He erases the entire room. He tosses the eraser over his shoulder. Now there is nothing left in the world except the cat and the mouse. The cat snatches him up in a fist. The cat's red tongue slides over glistening teeth sharp as ice picks. Here and there, over a tooth, a bright star expands and contracts. The cat opens his jaws wider, closes his eyes, and hesitates. The death of the mouse is desirable in every way, but will life without him really be pleasurable? Will the mouse's absence satisfy him entirely? Is it conceivable that he may miss the mouse, from time to time? Is it possible that he needs the mouse, in some disturbing way?

As the cat hesitates, the mouse reaches into a pocket of his robe and removes a red handkerchief. With swift circular strokes he wipes out the cat's teeth while the cat's eyes watch in surprise. He wipes out the cat's eyes. He wipes out the cat's whiskers. He wipes out the cat's head. Still held in the cat's fist, he wipes out the entire cat, except for the paw holding him. Then, very carefully, he wipes out the paw. He drops lightly down and slaps his palms together. He looks about. He is alone with his red handkerchief in a blank white world. After a pause, he begins to wipe himself out, moving rapidly from head to toe. Now there is nothing left but the red handkerchief. The handkerchief flutters, grows larger, and suddenly splits in half. The halves become red theatre curtains, which begin to close. Across the closing curtains, words write themselves in black script: "The End." ♦

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THE CRITICS

BOOKS

PUNCH LINE

The history of jokes and those who collect them.

BY JIM HOLT

A few years ago, browsing in a dusty used-book store in Maine, I came across a curious volume. It was a fat, tattered paperback bearing the title "Rationale of the Dirty Joke." Its author, I saw from the sixties-style futuristic cover, was G. Legman. Taking it off the shelf and riffling though its badly oxidized pages, I found that it contained what looked like thousands of erotic and scatological jokes, arranged under such themes as "coital postures," "the big inch," and "zoöphily." These jokes were accompanied by Freudian-style commentary, along with random animadversions on aspects of sixties life, like Zip Codes, hippies, women who swear, and Marshall McLuhan. The most striking aspect of the volume was the author's esoteric scholarship, exemplified by this sentence from the introduction:

> Particular attention should be drawn to three rare works presenting Modern Greek, Arabic, and other Levantine erotic tales and foolstories: *La Fleur Lascive Orientale* ('Oxford' [Bruxelles: Gay & Mlle. Doucé], 1882), anonymously translated from the originals by J.-A. Decourdemanche, an even rarer English retranslation also existing ('Athens' [Sheffield: Leonard Smithers], 1893); *Contes Licencieux de Constantinople et de l'Asie Mineure*, collected before 1893 by Prof. Jean Nicolaidès, and published after his sudden and mysterious death as the opening volume of a series imitating *Kryptádia*: "*Contributions au Folklore Erotique*" (Kleinbronn & Paris: G. Ficker [!], 1906-09, 4 vols.); and especially two modern French chapbooks, one entitled *Histoires Arabes* (Paris: A. Quignon, 1927), ascribed to an admittedly pseudonymous 'Khati Cheghlou,' and its sequel or supplement, *Les Meilleures Histoires Coloniales* (about 1935).

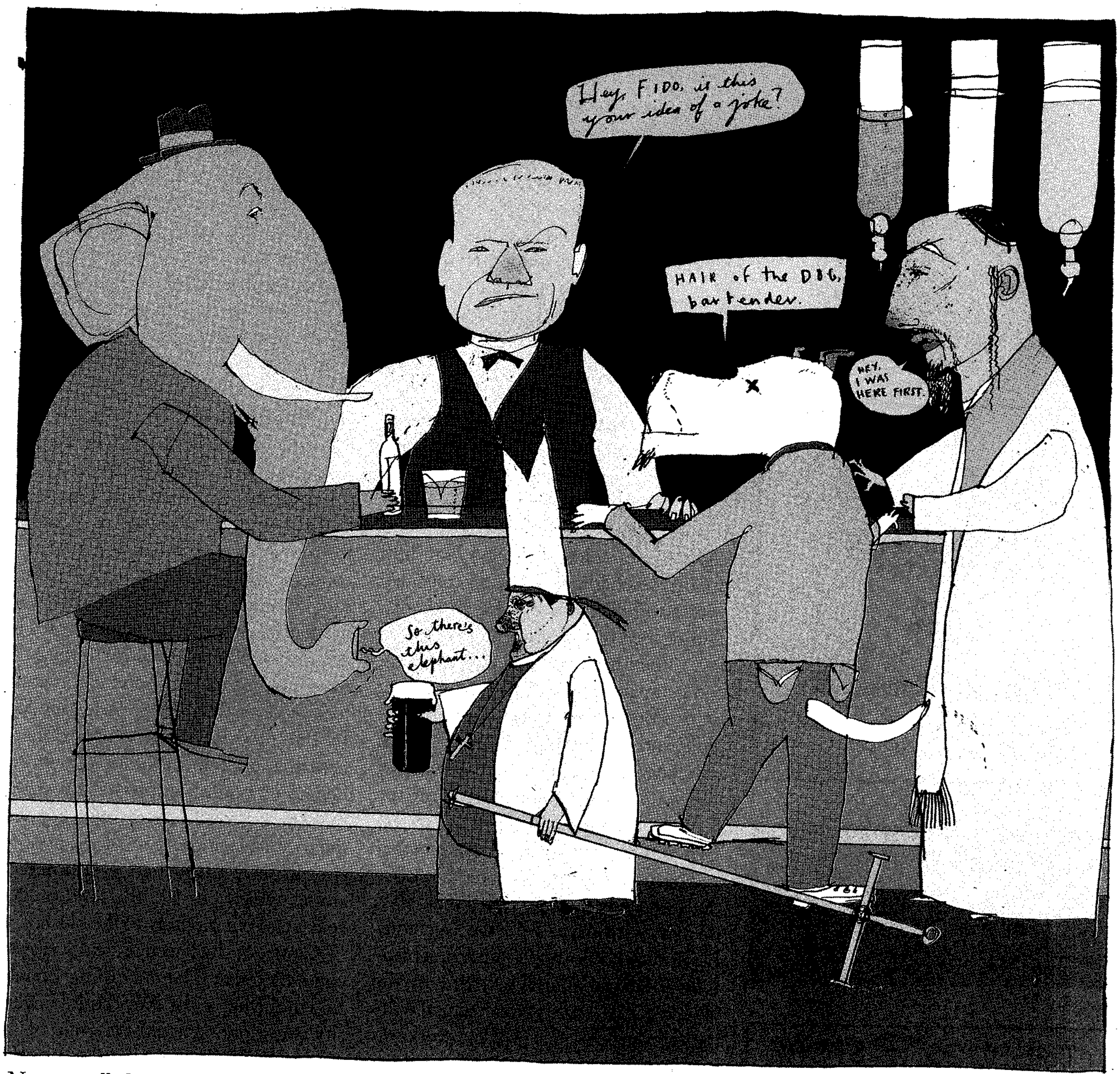
Noting the fanciful names (G. Ficker, Khati Cheghlou) and the cranky, erudite tone, I began to wonder whether this wasn't a wild Nabokovian put-on. No doubt "G. Legman" itself was a pseudonym; both the initial (G-spot?) and the surname (as opposed to tit-man?) were suspicious. But a few months later, in the late winter of 1999, I saw on the obituary page of the *Times* that Gershon Legman, a "self-taught scholar of dirty jokes," had died, at the age of eighty-one, in the South of France, where he lived in voluntary exile from his native United States.

A certain facetiousness might seem to attach to the phrase "scholar of dirty jokes." Is this really an area in which scholarship is appropriate or profitable? Well, jokes do fall into the category of folklore, along with myths, proverbs, legends, nursery rhymes, riddles, and superstitions. And a good proportion of the jokes in oral circulation involve sex or scatology. If the history of folklore aspires to be a history of the human mind, as some of its practitioners insist, somebody has to do the irksome job of collecting and recording obscene, disgusting, and blasphemous jokes, and ushering them into print.

Although we think of the joke as a cultural constant, it is a form of humor that comes and goes with the rise and fall of civilizations. What distinguishes the joke from the mere humorous tale is that it climaxes in a punch line—a little verbal explosion set off by a sudden switch in meaning. A joke, unlike a tale, wants to be brief. As Freud observed, it says what it has to say not just in few words but in *too* few words. The classic joke proceeds with arrowlike swiftness, resolving its matter in the form of a two-liner ("Hear about the bulimic stag party? The cake came out of the girl") or even a one-liner ("I was so ugly when I was born, the doctor slapped my mother"). Often, it is signalled by a formulaic setup, which might itself, in turn, become the subject of a meta-joke ("A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar. Bartender says, 'What is this, a joke?' ").

Joking is sometimes said to have been invented by Palamedes, the hero of Greek legend who outwitted Odysseus on the eve of the Trojan War. But since this proverbially ingenious fellow is also credited with inventing numbers, the alphabet, lighthouses, dice, and the practice of eating meals at regular intervals, the claim should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt. In the Athens of Demosthenes, there was a comedians' club called the Group of Sixty, which met in the temple of Heracles to trade wisecracks, and it is said that Philip of Macedon paid handsomely to have their jokes written down; but the volume, if it ever existed, has been lost. On the Roman side, Plautus refers to jestbooks in a couple of his plays, while Suetonius tells us that Melissus, a favorite professor of the Emperor Augustus, compiled no fewer than a hundred and fifty joke anthologies. Despite this, only a single jokebook survives from ancient times: the Philogelos, or "Laughter-Lover," a collection in Greek that was probably put together in the fourth or fifth century A.D. It contains two hundred and sixty-four items, several of which appear twice, in slightly different form. This suggests that the volume is not one jokebook but two combined, a hunch borne out by the fact that it is attributed to two authors, Hierocles and Philagrius, although joint authorship was rare at the time. Virtually nothing is known about either man; there is some scholarly speculation that the Hierocles in question was a fifth-century Alexandrian philosopher of that name who was once publicly flogged in Constantinople for paganism, which, as one classicist has observed, "might have given him a taste for mordant wit."

The jokes in the Philogelos are spare


Hey, FIDO, is this your idea of a joke?
HAIR of the DOG, bartender.
HEY, I WAS HERE FIRST.
So there's this elephant...

No one really knows where jokes come from, but the earliest joke collections were probably compiled some twenty-four centuries ago.

and pointed. (" 'How shall I cut your hair?' a talkative barber asked a wag. 'In silence!' ") They take on a gallery of stock characters: the drunk, the miser, the braggart, the sex-starved woman, and the man with bad breath, as well as a classic type known as the *scholastikos*, variously translated as "pedant," "absent-minded professor," or "egghead." ("An egghead was on a sea voyage when a big storm blew up, causing his slaves to weep in terror. 'Don't cry,' he consoled them, 'I have freed you all in my will.' ") Some of the jokes are now more cryptic than funny, perhaps because of lost undertones. A couple of jokes about lettuce, for example, might have struck a Roman audience as hilarious, given their belief that lettuce leaves, variously, promoted or impeded sexual function. But others, like No. 263 (lifted from Plutarch), would not be out of place at a Friars Club meeting: " 'I had your wife for nothing,' someone sneered at a wag. 'More fool you. I'm her husband, I have to have the ugly bitch. You don't.' " The most haunting joke in the Philogelos, however, is No. 114, about a resident of Abdera, a Greek town whose citizens were renowned for their foolishness: "Seeing a eunuch, an Abderite asked him how many children he had. The eunuch replied that he had none, since he lacked the means of reproduction. Retorted the Abderite . . ." The rest is missing from the surviving text, which goes to show the strange potency of unheard punch lines.

The Philogelos was misplaced during the Dark Ages, and with it, seemingly, the art of the joke. Sophisticated humor was kept alive in the Arab world, where the more leisurely folktale was cultivated. During the centuries of Arab conquest, folktales from the Levant, many of them satirical or erotic, made their way through Spain and Italy. An Arab tale about a wife who is pleasured by her lover while her duped husband watches uncomprehendingly from a tree, for instance, is one of several that later

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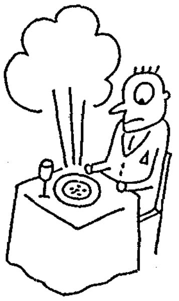
show up in Boccaccio's "Decameron." Once in Europe, the folktale began to cleave in two. On the one hand, with the invention of printing and the rise of literacy, it grew longer, filling out into the chivalric romance and, ultimately, the novel. On the other hand, as the pace of urban life quickened, it got shorter in its oral form, shedding details and growing more formulaic as it condensed into the humorous anecdote. It was in the early Renaissance that the art of the joke was reborn, and the midwife was a man called Poggio.

Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) was one of the most colorful and versatile of the Italian humanists. A secretary to eight Popes over a half century, he fathered fourteen children with a mistress before taking, at the age of fifty-five, a beautiful eighteen-year-old bride, who bore him another six children. His career coincided with a turbulent era in Church history. During the Great Schism, there were two and sometimes three competing Popes, and councils had to be called to restore unity. Poggio was a passionate bibliophile, and he profited from the disorder, travelling throughout Europe in search of lost works of ancient literature. From the dungeons of remote medieval monasteries he rescued precious manuscripts that had been rotting into oblivion, and laboriously deciphered and copied them. It is thanks to him that we have Lucretius' De Rerum Natura and Quintilian's Institutio Oratoria, as well as many of the orations of Cicero, the architectural writings of Vitruvius, and Apicius' works on cooking. Not only was Poggio the greatest book-hunter of his era; he also wielded one of its wickedest pens, satirizing the vices of the clergy and lambasting rival scholars in his Ciceronian Latin. "In his invective he displayed such vehemence that the whole world was afraid of him," a contemporary observed. A skilled calligrapher, Poggio invented the prototype of the roman font. As chancellor of the Republic of Florence after his retirement from the Curia, he became that city's biographer. Yet, for all these accomplishments, Poggio ended up being best known for a book of jokes.

The Liber Facetiarum, usually called simply the Facetiae, was the first volume of its kind to be published in Europe. In this collection of two hundred and seventy-three items—jests, bons mots, puns, and humorous anecdotes—the expansive Arab-Italian *novella* can be seen turning into the swift *facezia*. Some of the material had been gathered by Poggio during his travels through Europe; several of the jests have been traced to tales told by Provençal bards in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But much of it came out of a sort of joke club in the Vatican called the Bugiale—the "fib factory." Here, papal scribes would gather at the end of a tedious day spent drafting bulls, dispensations, and encyclicals to shoot the breeze and tell scandalous stories. Poggio published his Facetiae in 1451, when he was seventy years old. Soon it was being read throughout Europe. Although many of the jokes were about sex and poked fun at the morals of churchmen, not a word of condemnation was heard from the Vatican. Presumably, since the Facetiae were written in Latin, they could be savored by the clerical class without corrupting the morals of the masses. Later commentators, however, were not so broad-minded. In 1802, the Reverend William Shepherd, the author of the only biography of Poggio in English, expressed his shock that "an apostolic secretary who enjoyed the friendship and esteem of the pontiff, should have published a number of stories which outrage the laws of decency, and put modesty to the blush."

Copies of the Facetiae are not easy to come by today. The only thing I could find in the library of New York University was a photocopied facsimile of an 1878 Paris edition that was the first unexpurgated translation of Poggio's book into French (even then, the really bawdy bits were left in Latin). Reading through it, I was struck by the familiarity of the themes. There are fat jokes, drunk jokes, erection jokes, and fart jokes. There is a joke about a guy tricked into drinking urine which would not have been out of place in "American Pie." In Facetia XLVII, a husband asks his wife why, if women and men get equal pleasure out of sex, it is the men who pursue the women rather than vice versa. "It's obvious," the wife says. "We women are always ready to make love, and you men aren't. What good would it do us to solicit you when you're not in the mood?"



As jokes go, this is less than sidesplitting, and yet the precise reversal of it appears in the television show "Curb Your Enthusiasm," when Cheryl, lying in bed with her husband, Larry, asks him why she's the one who always has to initiate sex. It's because we men are always ready to go, he replies—just tap me on the shoulder when you want it!

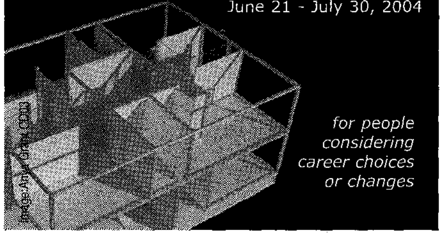
By modern standards, Poggio's Facetiae are invariably too long, and he has a regrettable tendency to preëmpt the punch line with an explanation, as in Facetia XXVI: "The abbot of Septimo, an extremely corpulent man, was travelling toward Florence one evening. On the road he asked a peasant, 'Do you think I'll be able to make it through the city gate?' He was talking about whether he would be able to make it to the city before the gates were closed. The peasant, jesting on the abbot's fatness, said, 'Why, if a cart of hay can make it through, you can, too!' " Nor are the Facetiae often very funny, at least when abstracted from the presumably chucklesome atmosphere of the Bugiale and set down in cold print. Nonetheless, by collecting and publishing them, Poggio set the precedent for a slew of later jestbooks, most of which shamelessly plundered his.

William Caxton, England's first printer of books, padded his own translation of Aesop, in 1484, with a sampling of Poggio's jokes, thus creating the earliest jestbook in English. By Shakespeare's time, jestbooks had become extremely popular. "I had my good wit out of the 'Hundred Merry Tales,' " Beatrice declares in "Much Ado About Nothing," referring to a popular collection of the day. Many of the items in these Tudor and Elizabethan jestbooks are artlessly scatological; for example, "What is the most cleanliest leaf among all other leaves? It is holly leaves, for nobody will wipe his arse with them." Many more are scarcely jokes at all. Instead of racing toward a punch line, they simply describe some prank, typically played by a wife on her husband, or illustrate a moral. (Preachers frequently inserted jests into sermons to keep their congregations from falling asleep.) Another nudge was needed to finish what Poggio had started: the making of the humorous tale into the joke. It came at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when—possibly because of a confusion with another classical writer called Hierocles—twenty-eight of the Philogelos jokes were appended to an edition of his "Commentary on the Golden Words of Pythagoras." The jokes were soon circulating in print throughout Europe.

Thanks to the popularity of the rediscovered Philogelos jokes, English humor got shorter and punchier—that is to say, jokier. The change shows up in "Joe Miller's Jests," the most enduringly popular of the new generation of jokebooks that began to flourish in the Georgian era. The book was named after a famous London comic actor, although he was not responsible for its publication and had died the year before. First published in 1739, it went through so many editions that a "Joe Miller" came to mean a stale joke.

The original edition contained everything from jokes about the fractured logic of Irishmen and bad breath ("A Lady being asked how she liked a Gentleman's Singing, who had a very *stinking* Breath, the Words are good, said she, but the *Air* is intolerable") to bawdy plays on the word "cock" and ribaldry at the expense of loose women ("A Gentleman said of a young Wench who constantly ply'd about the *Temple*, that if she had as much Law in her *Head*, as she had in her *Tail*, she would be one of the ablest *Counsel* in *England*"). The bluer material, however, did not survive the subsequent wave of prudery in Anglo-Saxon culture. In the early nineteenth century, around the time that Thomas Bowdler removed the indelicate bits from Shakespeare, jokebooks also got cleaned up. Little of Poggio could have made it into the expurgated columns of humor magazines like *Punch*. But the dirty joke lived on in oral culture until it was restored to print, in all its repulsive splendor, by Gershon Legman, in the nineteen-sixties.

Legman, I noticed in my decrepit copy of "Rationale of the Dirty Joke," had dedicated the volume "To the *Manes*"—shade—"of Poggio Bracciolini, Lover of Books, Folk-Humor, and Women." Did he feel some deep affinity with the mischievous Italian humanist? People who knew of Legman—he seems to have left behind a cult following—tell the most outlandish stories: that he created the sixties slogan "Make Love, Not War"; that he had an affair with Anaïs Nin and enlisted her help to write dollar-a-page pornography to order



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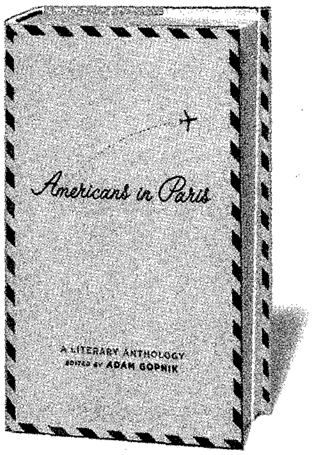

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for a rich Oklahoma "collector"; that he was behind the invention of the vibrating dildo; that he introduced origami to the West; that he left the United States to escape government persecution, taking refuge in a hill town on the French Riviera, where he lived a hand-to-mouth existence in a dilapidated castle that had once belonged to the Knights Templar.

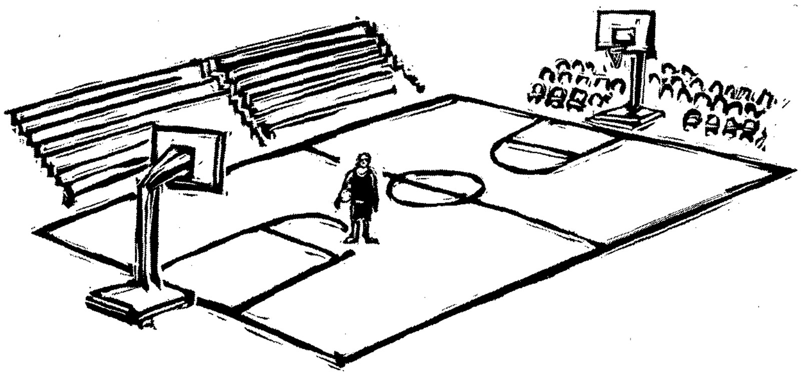
On investigation, most of this turned out to be at least partly true. (We have to take Legman's own word on the dildo and the slogan.) Legman was born in 1917 into a Jewish family in the coal country of Pennsylvania. He started collecting jokes early, clipping them from magazines and filing them by theme. After high school, he went to New York, where he educated himself in several languages; his university, he said, was the New York Public Library. At the age of twenty-three, he published his first book, "Oragenitalism," under the pseudonym Roger-Maxe de la Glannège (an anagram of his given name, George Alexander Legman). It bore the subtitle "An Encyclopaedic Outline of Oral Technique in Genital Excitation, Part I, Cunnilinctus." (Legman later explained that he lacked the courage to do the research for fellatio.) At the time, writing a treatise on oral sex was deemed as dangerous as political sedition. When his publisher's office was raided, Legman briefly fled the state. On his return to New York, he worked as an erotic-book hunter for the sexologist Alfred Kinsey and inhabited the disreputable fringes of the city's literary world, where smut-peddlers were sometimes indistinguishable from avant-garde publishers of Joyce, Lawrence, and Henry Miller.

Legman, however, was more of a moralist than a pornographer. In the late nineteen-forties, he wrote "Love and Death," a fierce polemic, which argued that violence was the true pornography. Why, he asked, should children be exposed to relentless depictions of violence but shielded from those of lovemaking? "At least sex is normal," he wrote. "Is murder?" Legman published the book himself, shipping copies to customers by post from his three-room cottage in the Bronx. Although "Love and Death" was a tirade against censorship, not a piece of erotica, the United States Postal Service authorities accused its author-publisher of sending "indecent, vulgar and obscene materials" through the mail, and cut off his deliveries. Disgusted, Legman left the country, with his wife, for France. They bought a small piece of land on the Riviera with an olive grove and an old building (which was indeed on the site of a Knights Templar castle) that became a repository for his vast collection of rare volumes and his crates of index cards covered with limericks, jokes, and what he called "pissoir epigraphs."

Legman was a handsome man, with thick dark hair, blue eyes, and a strong nose; because of chronic poverty, he was typically dressed in threadbare clothes with a length of rope for a belt. Friends describe him as tetchy and difficult, but exhilarating to be around. Academics were put off by this autodidact from the murky demimonde, whose rambling prose was full of marginal jeremiads. Legman, in turn, was disdainful of folklorists with Ph.D.s, whom he called "Phudniks" and "cacademics." Yet, by freely making available to them materials that academic journals were afraid to publish, he helped establish erotic folklore as a respectable subject for scholarly study.

Reading through Legman's vast compilation of dirty jokes is a punishing experience, like being trapped in the men's room of a Greyhound bus station of the nineteen-fifties. And the jokes in "Rationale of the Dirty Joke" are what Legman deemed the "clean" dirty jokes, arranged by such relatively innocent themes as "the nervous bride," "phallic brag," and "water wit." In 1975 he published a second fat volume, "No Laughing Matter," which contained the "dirty" dirty jokes—nearly a thousand pages of jokes about anal sadism, venereal disease, and worse. Legman's avowed purpose was not to amuse the reader or furnish him with material for the locker room; he saw his work as a serious psychoanalytic study, one that would disclose the "infinite aggressions" behind jokes, mainly of men against women.

Legman spent three and a half decades collecting the jokes in these volumes—transcribing some sixty thousand variants on index cards, arranging them by type and motif, and tracing them from country to country and culture to culture, back to the time of Poggio and beyond. They were culled not only from written sources but also from the field: parlor, beer joint, bedroom, and public lavatory. (Many of the jokes are tagged by year and place of discovery: "Idaho 1932,"



JASON REGRETTED HIS DECISION TO LEAVE THE TEAM TO PURSUE A SOLO CAREER IN BASKETBALL.

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"Penna. 1949.") The result was, by his own account, a vast "decorative showcase" of anxiety, repression, and neurosis, a magnum opus written "almost as often in tears as in laughter." What drove him to this singular labor? According to one friend, he saw himself "as the keeper of the deepest subcellar in the burning Alexandria Library of the age; the subcellar of our secret desires, which no one else was raising so much as a finger to preserve."

But Legman must have suspected that he also had a subconscious stake in his massive dirty-joke project. As a lay analyst, he believed that "jokes are essentially an unveiling of the joke-teller's own neuroses and compulsions, and his guilts about these." An enthusiasm for a certain species of joke can be revealing in ways the enthusiast might not fully appreciate. Take the dead-baby jokes that were popular in the United States a few decades ago ("What's red and swings? A baby on a meat hook," and so on). If you were one of the teen-agers who used to tell such jokes, it might conceivably have had something to do with murderous impulses arising from sibling rivalry. Even parents could see the humor; after all, babies are such a lot of bother. Although "sick jokes" of this sort lay outside Gershon Legman's purview, he did make slightly puzzled reference to them, mentioning a "Dr. Dundes" as an authority.

Alan Dundes is a folklorist at the University of California at Berkeley, reverentially known there as the "Joke Professor." Dundes is the academy's most assiduous collector of jokes, the heir to Poggio and Legman. In the past five decades, he has produced several analytical collections of humor, notably "Cracking Jokes" (1987). He has also written or co-authored many articles in folklore journals on specific joke themes, with titles like "Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia" (toilet jokes); "Arse Longa, Vita Brevis" (AIDS jokes); "First Prize: Fifteen Years" (dissident jokes from Eastern Europe—the title is the punch line to the setup "Did you hear about the joke contest in Bucharest?"); and even a study of jokes about Gary Hart, "Six Inches from the Presidency"—which, he told me with some amusement when I reached him by phone in Berkeley, has just been translated into Russian.

Dundes was fascinated with jokes as a boy growing up in the suburbs of New York City. His father, an attorney, would return home from the city each evening with a few jokes he had picked up while playing bridge on the commuter train out of Grand Central, and tell them over dinner. As a graduate student at Yale, Dundes took a course in poetry with Cleanth Brooks and became interested in Yeats's use of Celtic mythology. This led him to the study of folklore, then an academically marginal field. In 1962, he obtained his Ph.D. from Indiana University, where, as a course requirement, candidates had to submit a hundred items of folklore that they had collected and analyzed. Dundes turned in a lot of jokes.

"Before then, it had never occurred to me to analyze the jokes I collected," he told me. "But Vladimir Propp's 'Mor-

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phology of the Folktale' had just come out in English”—he was referring to the 1928 work that identified thirty-one narrative elements which constitute the underlying structure of Russian fairy tales—“and I thought, Hey, this is a great methodology for jokes. So I was early to hop on the structuralist bandwagon.” But Dundes was also a Freudian, and remains one, “even in these days of Freud-bashing.” Freud himself was an industrious collector of Jewish jokes and considered them deeply significant. Although his collection was most likely destroyed in one of his periodic manuscript-burning sessions, some two hundred jokes, tales, puns, and riddles appear in his 1905 book “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.” Dundes was greatly influenced by this seminal work, which likens jokes to dreams. (Both involve the condensation and displacement of meanings, the representation of things by their opposites, the triumph of fallacy over logic—all to outwit the inner censor.) “Some people believe jokes and nursery rhymes and fairy tales are just harmless little stories that don't mean anything,” Dundes told me. “But they're not meaningless. And they're not necessarily harmless, either.”

I could not resist posing the tiresome but still mysterious question: Where do jokes come from? “There are two classic theories about the origin of jokes,” Dundes said. “One is that they come from stockbrokers, who have time on their hands between sales and a communications network to send jokes around. The other theory is that they are made up by prisoners, who have a lot of spare time and a captive audience.” He added, “Lately, these two theories have merged.”

But the romantic ideal of individual creation seems inadequate when it comes to jokes. “The classic ones get told over and over again in updated dress,” Dundes noted. “A good example is one that I first heard about Richard Nixon. So Nixon's taking a walk around the White House grounds one winter day when he comes across the words ‘I hate Tricky Dick’ written in urine in the snow. He tells the Secret Service to investigate. A week later, they come back to him and say, ‘Well, Mr. President, we've analyzed the urine, and it turns out to be Secretary Kissinger's. But we've also analyzed the handwriting, and it's the First Lady's.’ ” Dundes heard the same joke during the Clinton years, with Kissinger and Pat Nixon replaced by Al Gore and Hillary, or even Chelsea. Indeed, versions of it go back to the Ozark mountain culture of the eighteen-nineties. “People on the Internet today have no idea that the jokes they're trading are hundreds of years old,” he said.

Folklorists are fond of the idea that jokes don't get invented; they evolve. As Legman put it, “*Nobody* ever tells jokes for the first time.” Consider the following joke, current in mid-twentieth-century America, about an impecunious couple who marry for love. Since there is nothing for breakfast in the morning, the husband instead has sex with his wife on the kitchen table before going off to work and also when he returns home for lunch. Coming back famished in the evening, the husband finds his wife sitting in the kitchen with her panties down and her feet up on the oven door. “Just warming up your supper, darling,” she says. This jest can be traced back to a late-eighteenth-century Scottish rhyme titled “The Supper Is Na Ready,” and from there almost two centuries earlier to a 1618 French collection of libertine poetry (“*Mais le souper n'est pas encore cuit*”), and ultimately to the Philogelos: “Said a young man to his randy wife, ‘Wife, what shall we do, eat or make love?’ ‘Whichever you like; there's no bread.’ ” This may be the longest joke lineage ever established, reaching back some fifteen centuries. It is the labor of the great joke collectors—a few brilliant, polymathic, and sometimes eccentric men—that has made us aware of such continuities in the nether regions of civilization. Some have piggybacked on the work of earlier collectors; others have added analyses or rhetorical flourishes. But Poggio remains the most important of them, the man who reintroduced the lost classical art of the joke to Western culture.

After Poggio's death, the people of Florence entombed him with much pomp in the Church of Santa Croce. Donatello was commissioned to make a statue of him, which was installed in the façade of the Duomo. A century later, in 1569, some alterations were undertaken in the cathedral, and Poggio's statue was removed from its original position and placed in a grouping of the Twelve Apostles. There the first modern joke collector can be found, timelessly keeping company with martyrs and evangelists. ♦

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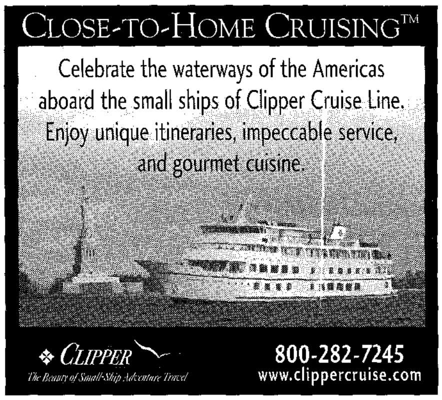
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BRIEFLY NOTED

The King of America, *by Samantha Gillison (Random House; $21.95).* In 1961, Stephen Hesse, the son of an American oil titan, finds himself adrift off the coast of Irian Jaya, in the path of a monsoon. Inspired by the disappearance of Michael Rockefeller in Dutch New Guinea, Gillison's novel excavates the interior life of a lonely, willful "prince of America" whose every relationship and attempt at achievement is tainted by his father's wealth and power. The mystery here is not Stephen's ultimate fate (Rockefeller's body was never found) but what draws him from his sheltered world to an untouched Stone Age land where women suckle piglets and men wear necklaces of human vertebrae. As Stephen ranges through the jungle, his fixation on collecting tribal carvings becomes a doomed hunt for himself and "a pure expression of what it was to be a man: sexual, angry, full of remorse, sorry to be a creature that will die."

The Outside World, *by Tova Mirvis (Knopf; $24).* Mirvis's first novel, "The Ladies Auxiliary," followed a single mother with flower-child leanings who entered the Orthodox Jewish community in Memphis, where the author herself grew up. Memphis figures here, too, as the place where Tzippy Goldman and Bryan Miller move when they get married. Tzippy is fleeing an ultra-traditional neighborhood and a mother obsessed with the marriageability of her daughters; Bryan, conversely, has no patience with his comparatively secular family. Each is attracted to the other's background. Mirvis lacks the depth that Allegra Goodman brings to this territory, but her chatty style and her eye for cultural contradictions are always engaging.

Something from the Oven, *by Laura Shapiro (Viking; $24.95).* In the fifties, we're always told, the food industry barged into the American kitchen, waving TV dinners, and destroyed home cooking. Not so fast, Shapiro says. As she reveals, women refused many of the new convenience foods. Fish sticks they accepted, but not ham sticks. Canned peaches, yes; canned hamburgers, no. The industry people hired psychologists to help them combat such resistance; the women's magazines, fond of their advertisers, told readers how, by splashing some sherry over the frozen peas, they could still make dinner look as though they had cooked it. The book is very funny, and also subtle. The most interesting character is Poppy Cannon, the foremost food columnist of the period, who, though she started her mint-jelly recipe with lime jello, was a serious feminist and had a long affair with—and eventually married—the head of the N.A.A.C.P. After American cooking passed her by, Cannon threw herself off the balcony of her apartment. This chapter reads like a Russian novel.

Rats, *by Robert Sullivan (Bloomsbury; $23.95).* For a year, Sullivan made pilgrimages to a "filth-slicked little alley" near City Hall to observe rats in their natural habitat. He also trolled libraries for rat lore and interviewed exterminators, biologists, politicians, and ordinary citizens about the timeless struggle against New York's "most unwanted inhabitants." The logic behind his peregrinations is often elusive, but the result is a wealth of satisfying information: rats like raw beef, but they like macaroni-and-cheese even more; bringing a rat to court is an effective way to make a point about poor housing conditions; there are more plague-infected rodents in North America today than there were in Europe at the time of the Black Death. Sullivan never falls in love with his subject the way he did in his book on the Meadowlands—rats are rats, after all—but he does persuade us that rats are "our mirror species, reversed but similar, thriving or suffering in the very cities where we do the same."

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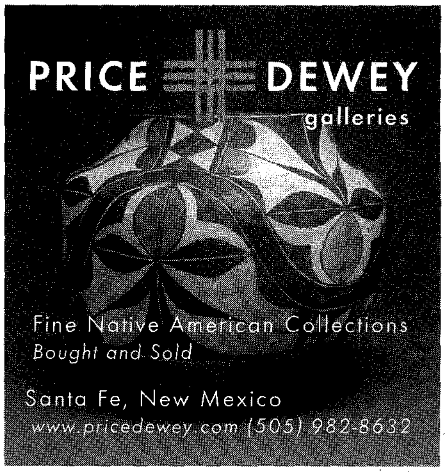
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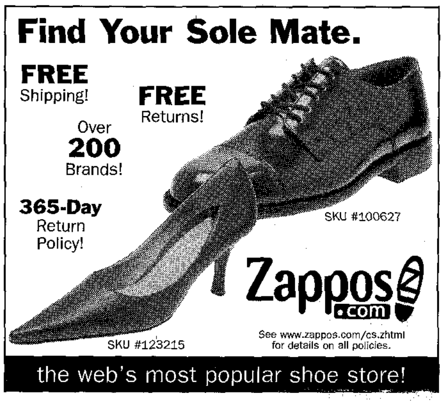
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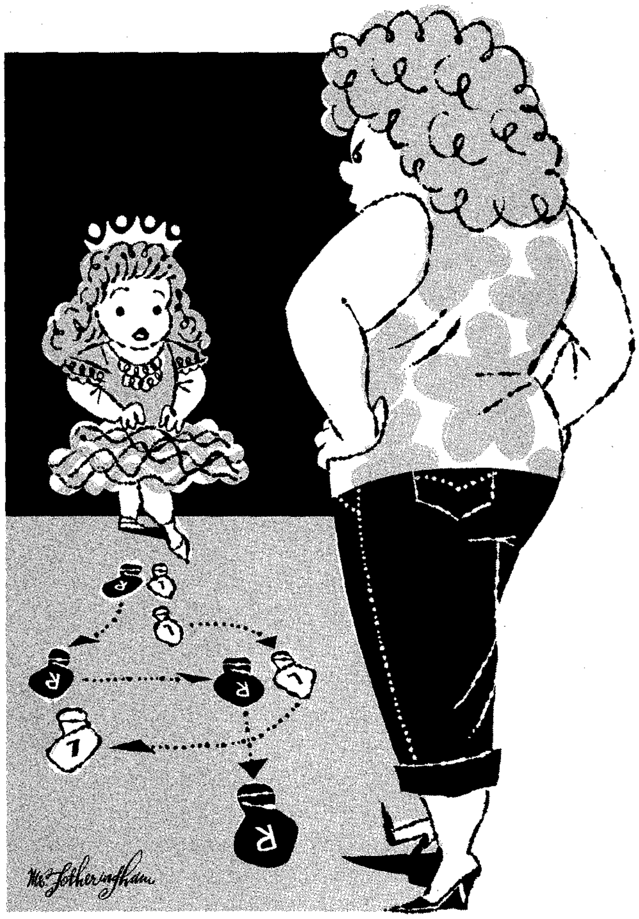
The business of child stardom.

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

"I'm so like a Captain von Trapp," a father of seven says in "Showbiz Moms & Dads," the Bravo series about child performers and their parental handlers, whose six weekly episodes begin on April 13th. The father, a now and probably forever struggling actor named Duncan Nutter (it means "a gatherer of nuts," he helpfully tells us, but, as may or may not be relevant in this case, it's also British slang for someone who's off his rocker), is right, up to a point; like the storied Captain, he has pushed every one of his children into performing, and sometimes offers them up to casting directors as a unit, but the twist is that one day his children may well flee over the Alps to get away from *him*. In any event, the talent and drive of the Nutter brood, and of the four other children featured in the series, range across the spectrum, and the odds are that they are less likely to have a "Sound of Music" ending to their—or their parents'—quest for fame than they are to face the sound of one hand clapping. Childhood enthusiasms often end that way, because children have a way of moving on. You know how it is: one day your kid wakes up and announces that he doesn't want to be a crane operator anymore. But at least that kind of dream is not subject to manipulation or marketing by pushy parents. With one or two exceptions, the parents in "Showbiz Moms & Dads" seem to want to bottle their children's very childhood, suffocating it even as they sell it.

Two of the series' executive producers, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, are longtime documentarians known for taking a cool, often unsettlingly nonjudgmental approach to hot-to-the-touch subjects, such as Monica Lewinsky; Tammy Faye Bakker; Michael Alig, a flamboyant eighties New York club fixture who murdered his roommate; and male hustlers in Los Angeles. (Their movie "The Hidden Führer," which explores the possibility that Hitler was homosexual, will be shown on Cinemax on April 20th.) In "Showbiz Moms & Dads," though, the filmmakers don't try to maintain a cool distance from their adult subjects; when it comes to the way parents treat their children, judgments are impossible to avoid.



Beauties and beasts in "Showbiz Moms & Dads."

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

Unlike the 2001 HBO documentary "Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen," which focussed largely on one parent and one child, a mother and her four-year-old named Swan (she turned five during the filming, and thus entered a tougher arena, where she had to compete with grizzled, streetwise kindergartners), as they wended their way through the Southern pageant circuit, "Showbiz Moms & Dads" features a variety of performers. There is one mother-daughter pageant pair whose business end is a four-year-old named Emily; two actresses named Jordan, one of them eight and the other fourteen; and a thirteen-year-old singer named Shane, who hopes to become an "international star." And then there are the Nutters, only one of whom, a thirteen-year-old, is actually making a go of things; he's in the travelling production of "The Full Monty," and has been on the road for nearly two years. He says that he misses his family, who moved from a roomy house in Vermont to a cramped two-bedroom apartment in Queens so that Duncan could follow his bliss (which at the moment means that he is a ticket-taker at the St. James Theatre), but he confesses to enjoying the respite from them, too.

The five families were well chosen to highlight both the similarities and the differences among them. In most of the families, the driving force is a mother who functions as a single parent, even if she is married; the bond between parent and child in these show-biz dyads doesn't seem to allow for a third party. In the case of the Nutters—Duncan is the only father in the show, and in the series' title graphic the word "Dads" is less than half the size of "Moms"—Duncan operates almost as a single parent when it comes to his children's careers. Mrs. Nutter, who avowedly has little interest in show business and teaches earth science at a public high school, accompanies her husband as he drags the kids to one audition after another (an average of five a week), but she is clearly a conscientious objector in Duncan's war against obscurity. (And wouldn't you know it—in a scene where a bunch of the kids, and then Nutter *père* and Nut-

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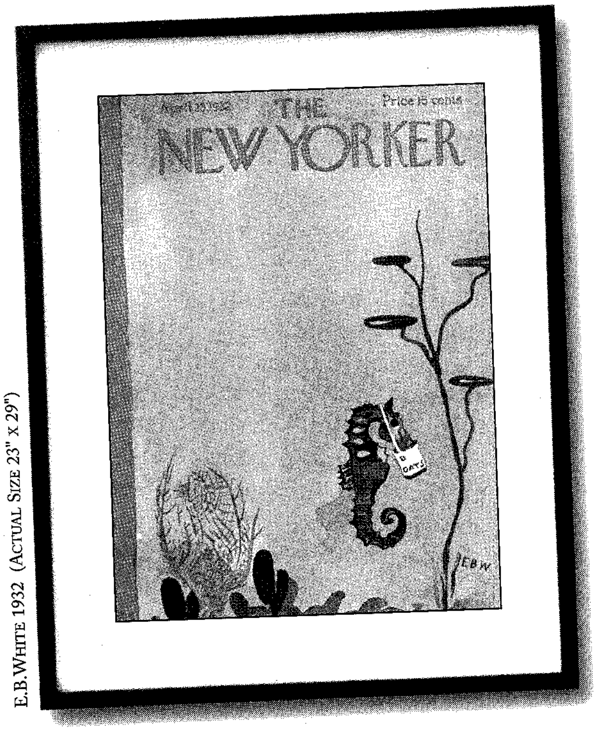
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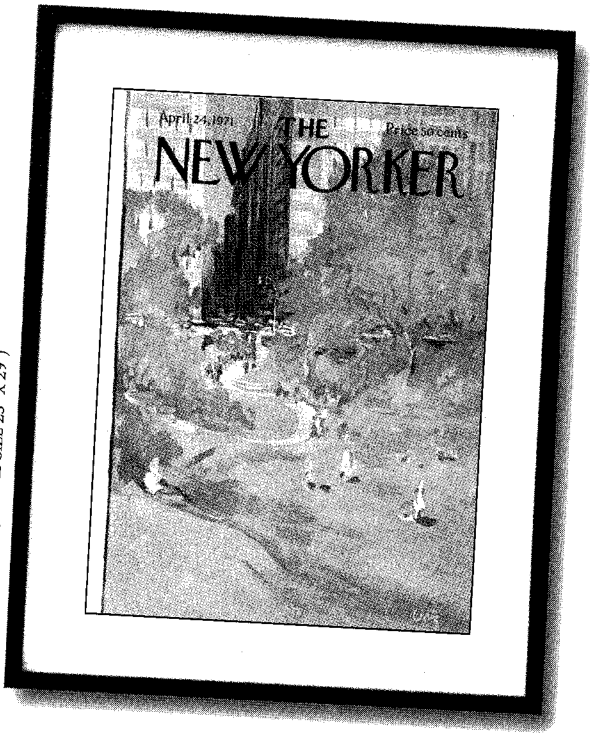
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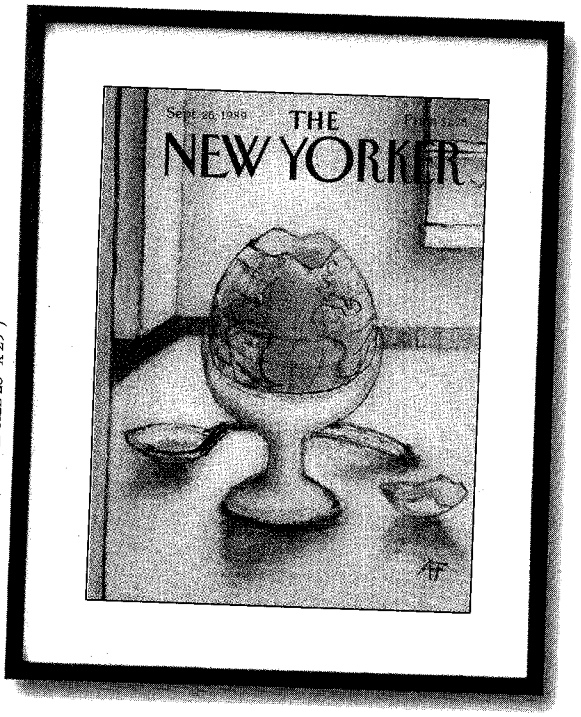
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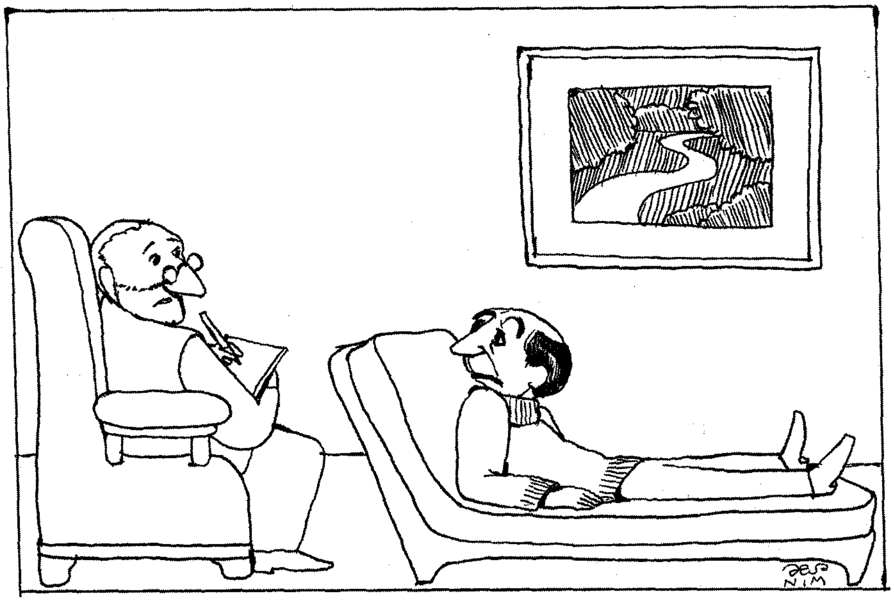
ter *mère*, read for a commercial, she is the only one who seems the least bit natural. The casting director gives the rest of them a fairly damning diagnosis: they're not acting, she says—they're merely performing lines.)

Except for Emily and the Nutters, the children in "Showbiz Moms & Dads" seem to have chosen their paths themselves, so, in a way, what's most interesting to watch is how the parents accommodate themselves to their offspring's dreams—basically, their lives are an endless loop of meals on the run, coaching, cheerleading, and chauffeuring—and how deluded they persist in being when their children's prospects seem fated to come to nothing. The kids are actually pretty good at bucking themselves up, or at least they know how to fake it for the cameras; it's the parents who can't hide their flop sweat. But, even though most of the children won't make it in show business, the stories aren't completely cut and dried. In a couple of cases, you think, Hey, you never know. The teen-age Jordan, who had some small successes a few years earlier, when she was conventionally cute and pimple-free, is now a bumptious, normal-looking girl of fourteen with a real mouth on her. She tells her mother, "Your sandwiches suck," and criticizes her for not paper-clipping the printouts of her monologues correctly. Oddly, she's more endearing than she sounds—and her mother properly laughs off most of her gibes as standard teen-age envelope-pushing—partly because her personality hasn't been entirely transmuted into robotic single-minded drive. She's not a neat little package, and that's what makes her appealing.

Emily's story is the one most likely to make the hair stand up on viewers' necks. It's impossible to watch a child beauty queen without thinking of JonBenet Ramsey, which Emily's mother, like the mother in "Living Dolls," acknowledges. For one thing, JonBenet's look was the gold standard in these pageants, and Emily closely resembles her: the coiffed blond hair, the makeup, the Vegas-inspired, all-wrong adult outfits on the forty-pound body, the grim, frozen smiles, and the shaking of hips that aren't there. Emily even has to suffer through having her body spray-tanned. Unfortunately, it is also impossible to think about JonBenet Ramsey without thinking about the fact that she was murdered. One hesitates to draw even a metaphorical line between Emily and JonBenet—to say that something in Emily is being snuffed out by her mother's attempts to turn her into a pint-size showgirl. There is a universe of difference between being arguably ill used and being killed, and yet it is hard to avoid the language of crime when it comes to these pageants. One feels that Emily is, at the very least, being robbed of her childhood, and even of her essential femaleness, which is repeatedly buried under a pile of fluffy feminine trappings. Emily's mother insists



"Are we there yet?"

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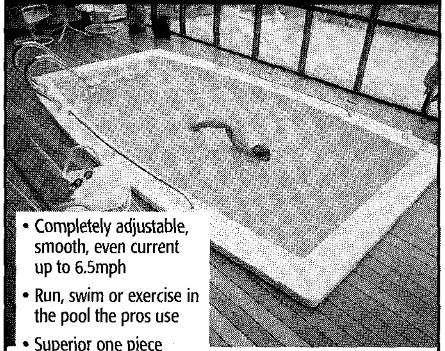
that she's doing all this for her daughter and protests to the unseen filmmakers that her daughter is no JonBenet. "Does she look like a happy child?" she says, thinking that the question is rhetorical. But the filmmakers, appropriately showing no mercy, answer the question by cutting to a shot of Emily looking absolutely miserable as she prepares to go onstage. There are juxtapositions like this throughout Emily's scenes—perverse expressions of parental love alternating with the depressing reality of Emily's obvious unhappiness. In one scene, in which Emily has been woken up at the crack of dawn and her hair is being put in rollers against her will, her mother tries to buy her off with sweets. She's not a mother trying to comfort and protect her daughter—she's a stranger offering candy to an innocent child.

"Showbiz Moms & Dads" has heartening, hopeful moments, though, thanks largely to the mother-daughter pair of Kimberly and Jordan, the bubbly, talented, and healthily chubby eight-year-old. It's partly luck, but mostly not, that these two have a wonderful, enviable relationship. Even though Kimberly is herself in show business, she has her feet on the ground, and she's determined to keep Jordan's feet there, too. The evident love in her maternal authority allows Jordan to flower; Kimberly's completely involved in Jordan's life, but she doesn't mess with her sense of self. And Jordan happens to be well on her way to having a successful career as a child actor (she has a recurring role on the Disney Channel's "That's So Raven"); there's no way to know how the peculiar kind of self-consciousness that child actors have to have, and which easily curdles if it is deployed in real life, will serve her as she grows up, but you don't see a ruined life on the horizon. I've seen only three episodes of "Showbiz Moms & Dads," so it may turn out that this seemingly ideal relationship is too good to be true. I doubt it, though. There is a scene in the third episode in which Kimberly is practicing lines with Jordan, and, suddenly cutting through the seriousness of it all, they simultaneously burst out laughing and can't stop. It comes as a shock to realize that, while watching all these people working so hard to find happiness and success, this is the first time you've seen, or felt, a moment of joy. ♦



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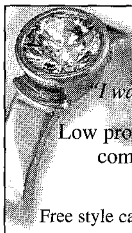

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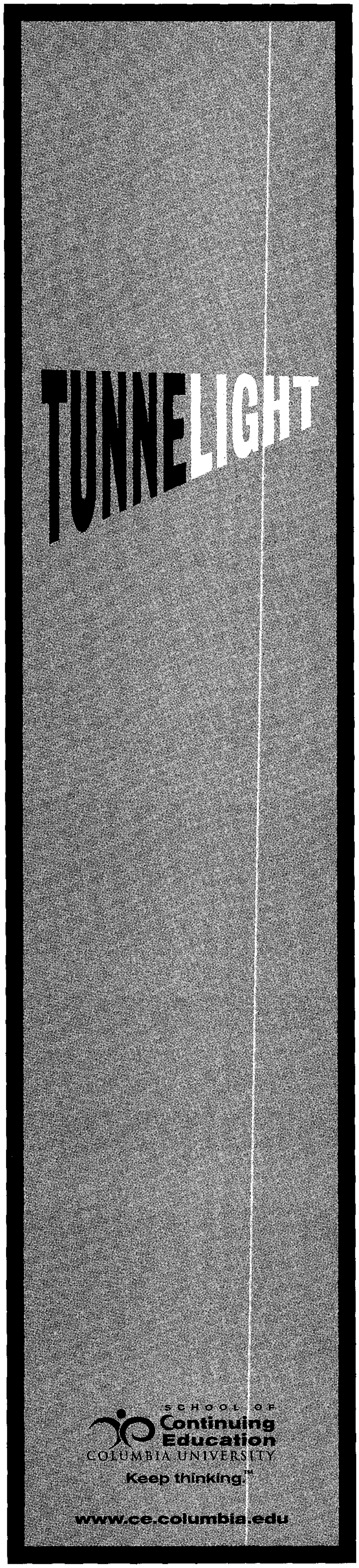

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UNNATURAL HISTORY

Studies in psychology and slickness.

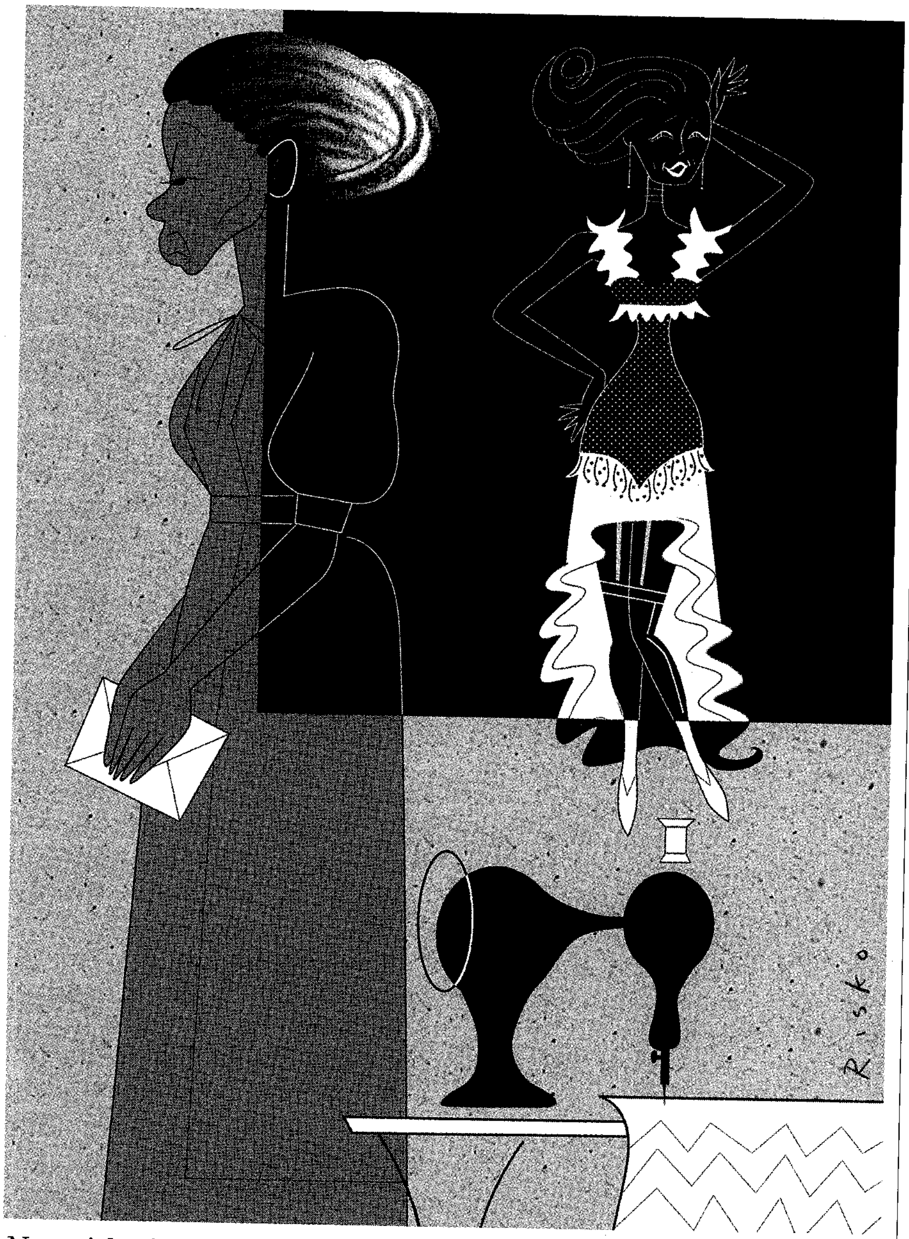
BY JOHN LAHR

At the final beat of Lynn Nottage's subtle and compelling "Intimate Apparel" (a Roundabout Theatre Company production at the Laura Pels), the stage picture freezes on the heroine, a thirty-five-year-old seamstress named Esther Mills (Viola Davis), hunched over her sewing machine. Projected above the proscenium are the words "Unidentified Negro Seamstress Ca. 1905." This photographic trope is an answer, half a century later, to Zora Neale Hurston's provocative contention that "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America." Hurston, who denounced "the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes," argued that in the "American Museum of Unnatural History" only the stories of quaint or exceptional black people are preserved.

Here, in a production directed by Daniel Sullivan, who matches Nottage's understatement with his own deft insight, the fine emotional filigree of an ordinary black life and the social forces that shape it is suggestively revealed. Esther is neither a victim nor a champion of her race; she is just a plain, hardworking Christian woman with talent and a sense of beauty. "I'm afraid it was either learn to sew or turn back sheets for fifty cents a day," she explains to Mr. Marks (Corey Stoll), the Jewish merchant who sells her cloth and shares her passion for texture and craftsmanship. That understanding, acquired when she was seventeen, is what has elevated Esther above the servant class, providing her with both the mobility and the earning power to become an independent woman. "It was as though God kissed my hands when I first pulled the fabric through the sewing machine and held up a finished garment," she says. "I discovered all I need in these fingers." "Intimate Apparel" tells Esther's story in quiet strokes, which nonetheless build to something both unexpected and sensational: an anatomy of goodness.

Before the play begins, one of Esther's elegant salmon-pink corsets is suspended, on a tailor's dummy, center stage: it is a work of embroidered art. Esther's expensive, sumptuous designs are all about erotic allure and seduction; she, on the other hand, is not. A shy, self-effacing virgin, she projects her own repressed sensuality into the material she designs. She may sew intimate apparel, but she is a stranger to intimacy. When we first see Esther, she is at her bench adding lace trim to a camisole while a wedding party takes place downstairs at the boarding house where she has resided for eighteen years. The only spinster among the twenty-three women who have lived in the house during that time, Esther is sensitive and solitary, pragmatic and proud. Davis powerfully conveys Esther's backbone and her bravery. "I ain't going down there to be paraded like some featherless bird," Esther tells the landlady, Mrs. Dickson (Lynda Gravátt), who is trying to make a match for her with a bellman at the party. "He weighs nearly as much as your horse. . . . I ain't giving up so easy," Esther says. "Sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular," Mrs. Dickson replies. The women in Esther's life—Mrs. Dickson, a tenderloin client called Mayme (Lauren Velez), and Esther's Fifth Avenue socialite customer, Mrs. Van Buren (Arija Bareikis)—have all in one way or another sold themselves to acquire capital. But Esther's capital is her talent, and it gives her an inherent integrity. At her core, she says, she feels that she is "a good decent woman and worthy."

Born during "the hurly-burly of the Reconstruction," as Hurston called it, Esther is the child of former slaves. When she was a baby, her father lost his



Nottage's heroine, Esther, may sew intimate apparel, but she is a stranger to intimacy.

tongue in a fight over a chicken. "So I never heard him speak, no complaints, no praise, no gentle words, no goodbye," she says. Esther herself is handicapped by the muteness of slavery: she cannot read or write. Her eloquence is expressed in gestures, not words. This impediment becomes critical when she is charmed by the lyrical correspondence of an African-Caribbean man, George Armstrong (the excellent Russell Hornsby), who was given her name by a member of her church who works alongside him digging the Panama Canal. To write back, Esther enlists Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme as her amanuenses. "I ain't got the words," she tells Mrs. Van Buren, holding up a particular piece of silk. "But I want him to know this color, magenta red. What it make you feel right now." The correspondence ultimately leads to a proposal of marriage, and Act I of "Intimate Apparel" concludes with the bewildered bride and groom standing together and apart, staring straight ahead as a supertitle reads, "Unidentified Negro Couple Ca. 1905." In its account of Esther's reckless leap of faith, the play manages to capture something that is rarely dramatized: the exhilarating newness of freedom. Esther, unlike her parents and centuries of their ancestors, holds her emotional destiny in her own hands; she is free to make a choice, even a bad one.

George proves to be less lyrical and civilized than his letters suggested. His

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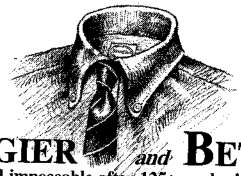
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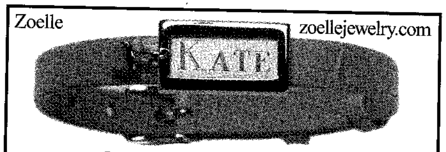
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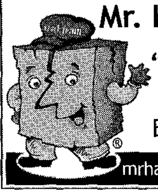

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gamble on America and marriage soon begins to feel like a bad bet. He can't find good work; in his humiliation he drinks and whores and, when Esther discovers the elaborate smoking jacket that she made for his wedding present on Mayme's bed, she knows with whom. Still, she struggles to make the marriage work. George wants to buy a stable of twelve draft horses; Esther is trying to save her money to buy a beauty parlor. "Look at yuh," he says. "How know pretty from the looking glass?" Nonetheless, in a terrific scene, as George paints Esther a picture of financial and emotional security in which she wants to believe, she gives him her hard-won nest egg. Shocked by his greedy response, she pulls his love letters out from under the bed. "You ain't the man in these letters, because that gentleman would have thanked me," she says. "Who wrote them letters, George? Tell me!" George's correspondence, it turns out, was also bogus, a fantasy concocted for ten cents a letter. "They warn't my words, but that don't mean I ain't feel them t'ings," he says. As he leaves with her money, he adds, "You'll see. I'll be back. And we'll begin here." It's part of Nottage's triumph that she makes Esther and us believe him.

In her first letter to George, Esther tells him all about Mr. Marks, the handsome Orthodox Jew who sells her fabric. "He got everything you need, even things you don't know you need," she says. For Esther, the line carries a special irony; there is an unstated but real affection between the two. Whether she is fixing a button or ever so gently touching the cloth of Marks's black jacket, Esther longs to reach out and connect. It is Marks who offers her tea, displays concern for her well-being, exhibits unswerving faith in her. "I can see from your hands that you are blessed with the needle and the thread, which means you'll never be without warmth," he tells her. In her scenes with Marks, the self-deprecating Esther becomes more confident and self-assured. Eventually, she gives him the smoking jacket that was meant for her faithless husband. At the finale, Esther is in her old rooming house, forever wedded, it would seem, to her craft. She sits down at her sewing machine with resolve. She may never own her beauty parlor, but she has control of her talent and her life.

If "Intimate Apparel" illuminates the psychological impact of African-Americans' escape from slavery, Stephen Belber's "Match" bears witness to the commercial theatre's slavery of escape. "Everyone's looking for answers" is the poster catchphrase for this slick piece of naturalistic claptrap (directed by Nicholas Martin, at the Plymouth), and, oh boy, do we get them. Despite its labyrinth of well-crafted explanation, the play asks no questions. An excellent ensemble of actors gives this shallowness the illusion of depth. A husband and wife, Lisa (Jane Adams) and Mike (Ray Liotta), under the pretext of interviewing a retired choreographer-dancer, Tobi (Frank Langella), spend the best part of Act I debriefing him about his peripatetic career. It's a testament to Langella's expertise and swishy allure that he can hold the audience's attention with this persiflage, which lacks any hint of subtext. Finally, toward the end of the act, Mike, a sullen policeman, cuts to the stroll: he has issues with anger, with homosexuals, and with Tobi, in particular, whom he believes is the deadbeat father who abandoned him and his mother. Tobi denies this, so Mike, as one does, jumps him and swabs his mouth for a DNA sample.

As Mike heads off to have the sample tested by a technician friend who evidently doesn't mind working late to help out actors trapped in implausible plots, Tobi and Lisa share intimacies over a Chinese meal. "It's rare that I get orally violated and treated to moo goo gai pan by the same two friends," he says. Soon, however, the oral violation is nothing compared with the aural one. Tobi, who now admits that he is Mike's dad, is a gay man who hasn't had sex in six years; Lisa is a married woman who hasn't had sex for eleven months. Naturally, the talk turns to cunnilingus. Lisa is startled but tempted. "It just . . . catches me a bit off guard," she says. "Oh, well," Tobi says, "most good cunnilingus offers do." Do they have sex? Is Tobi the father? Will Lisa stay with Mike or will Mike stay with Tobi or will Lisa and Tobi get it on? Who knows? Who cares? ♦

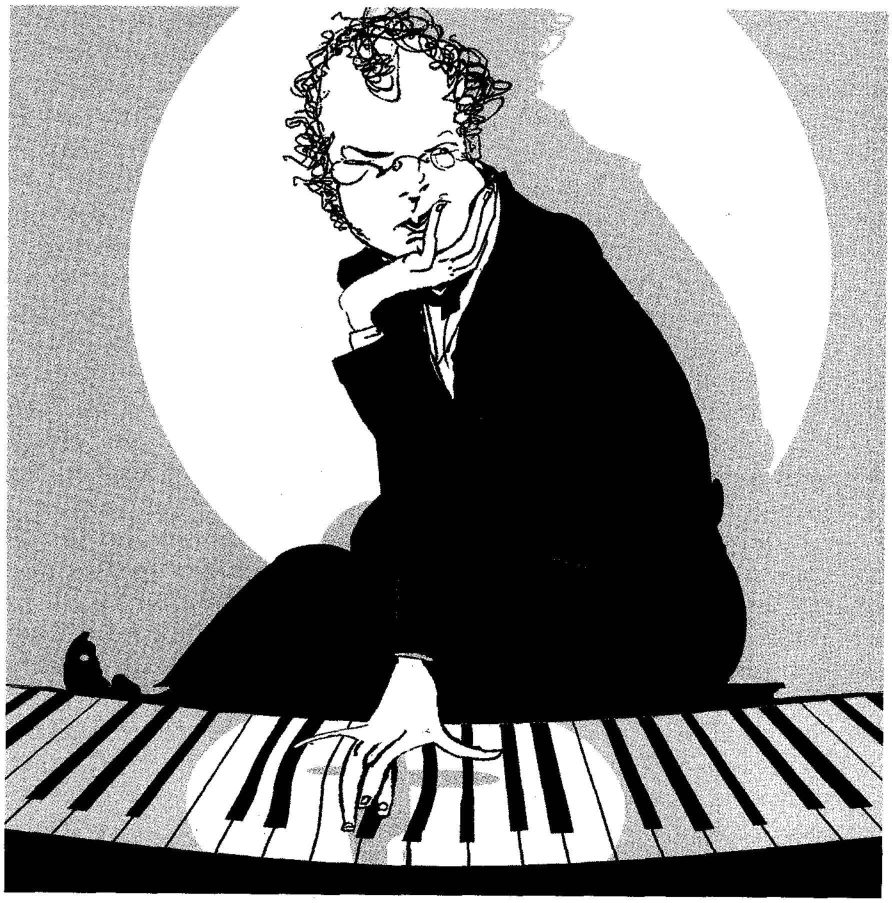
MUSICAL EVENTS

THE SONATA SEMINAR

Leon Fleisher's exuberant exploration of Schubert.

BY ALEX ROSS

"There are so few notes," the pianist Leon Fleisher said, "but so many implications." The setting was a recent master class at Carnegie Hall. Fleisher, the master in question, was leading four young musicians through the mystical landscapes of the late sonatas of Schubert. He was speaking about the Andante movement of Schubert's B-Flat-Major Sonata, but he might as well have been describing Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," or Brahms's Intermezzos, or any other music in which a smattering of notes conveys a world of feeling. "There are so few notes, but the implications go back billions of years," Fleisher went on. "You have to be like the Hubble Space Telescope, which sees stars as old as the universe. The stars are dead, but their light is reaching us just now."



Schubert's C-Minor Sonata is a violent work—and sadistically difficult to play.

ISTVAN BANYAI

Fleisher is seventy-five, but he looks an eternal, grizzled, professorial sixty. He is one of the incorruptible legends of his profession; some time ago, students took to calling him the "Obi-Wan Kenobi of the piano." Working with him on the Schubert sonata was Inon Barnatan, a twenty-five-year-old Israeli pianist with a clean-cut look. Barnatan smiled nervously and looked at the keyboard. How do you make notes sound like ten-billion-year-old stars? He tried again. He had been playing with exceptional stylishness; he obtained a hypnotic tone from the piano. But in his hands the Andante felt a little too finished, too smooth; the main theme didn't sing out enough against the

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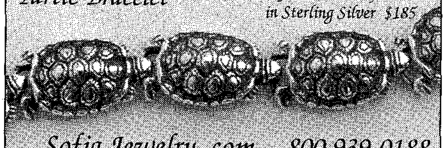

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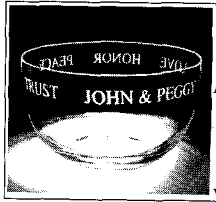

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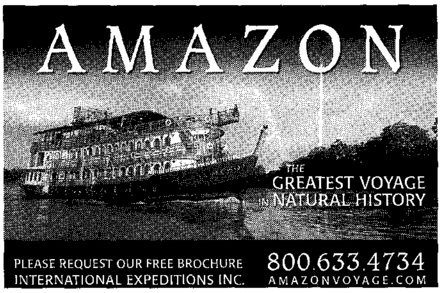
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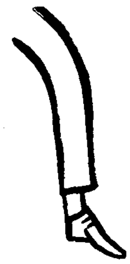
accompaniment, which consists only of C-sharps slowly rising by octaves.

Fleisher changed his tack. "O.K., try playing these C-sharps as if you were a conductor giving a beat. You are making a grid underneath the music. It has to stay *exactly* the same. The melody can sway this way and that, it can come in a little before the beat or a little after it, but the C-sharps must be unbending."

Barnatan resumed playing. The C-sharps chimed in clockwork patterns. Suddenly, the melodic line was freer, more sensual; its shape was framed by the grid. "Good," Fleisher said. Barnatan added a few accents of passion and began swaying from side to side. "Not so good," Fleisher said. "When you get louder, the character changes. Your plaintive, yearning creature, your nymph or naiad, is turning into some horrible, saliva-dripping alien."

The two dozen or so people who were attending the class laughed at the image—an alien clinging to the Hubble telescope. The rapt mood was broken. Barnatan's shoulders drooped, but he kept smiling, and tried once more. This time, Fleisher was satisfied. "Lovely," he said. The next day, Barnatan did it again, and Fleisher said nothing for a minute or two. "I'm enormously moved by your growth," he said. "Now all you have to do is play it a hundred and fifty times."



Playing the same sonata hundreds of times in public is something that Leon Fleisher never got to do. In the nineteen-fifties, he was hailed, along with William Kapell, as one of the most brilliant American pianists of his generation; he made near-definitive recordings of the Brahms concertos with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra. Then, in 1964, while preparing for a tour of the Soviet Union, he found that the fourth and fifth fingers of his right hand were involuntarily curling up. He gritted his teeth and practiced harder. Within a few months, his right hand was almost useless. He was suffering, although he did not know it at the time, from a neurological condition known as dystonia, which is a kind of short circuit between the fingers and the brain. Only in the past few years, after receiving Botox injections in his hand, which relaxed his muscles, has he been able to play again at full strength.

Fleisher recently told his life story at a presentation sponsored by the Dystonia Medical Research Foundation, in New York. Not one to sentimentalize, he began by saying, "It's a pretty good soap opera." Nonetheless, he confessed that the loss of his right hand had nearly broken his spirit. What saved him was the realization that he loved music more than he loved the piano. He took up pieces written for the left hand alone, he learned conducting, and, above all, he taught. His reputation as a sage of the piano crystallized at this time. By his own account, he could no longer push his students off the bench in order to demonstrate how a passage should go; instead, he had to use words. He had the advantage of having studied in the nineteen-forties with Artur Schnabel, who was perhaps the sagest pianist of the century—a poet of the instrument, a scholar of the repertory, a master of language. Many of Fleisher's ideas about articulating rhythm, melody, and harmony come straight from his memories of Schnabel's classes, which took place in a famously over-upholstered apartment on Central Park West.

Listening to Fleisher talk about music is delightfully dizzying. The metaphors come in an endless flow. Play like a cat, he might say, but with sheathed claws. Play it like a Bavarian milkmaid, not like Britney Spears. Fingers shouldn't be hammers, they should be dolphin flippers. This chord change could be from a Marlene Dietrich song; croak over it. Don't slow down like a bad Italian tenor. More Talmudic. Play it as if with the tip of a bow. Make it motionless, prayerful: a penitent lifts his eyes toward Heaven. Clothe the bass line in summer linen, not heavy wool. Syncopations should land like counterpunches: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." (Schnabel was the Muhammad Ali of pianists, Fleisher says: he didn't have a big sound, but he always knocked out the orchestra.)

Fleisher's references were sometimes arcane, as when he alluded to the "Toonerville Trolley" comic strip, which stopped running in 1955, or when he asked one student playing a meditative passage for "a chakra point below the navel." Even his most fanciful images, however, had a precise application. Yujia Wang, a dynamic player who was tackling Schubert's C-Minor Sonata, was too brutal in her attack. The piece has violence in it, Fleisher told her, but not of a modern kind. "Back in 1828, when this was writ-

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ten, people fought duels, and before they took out their swords they looked each other in the eye," he said. "Now our killing is long-distance. Bombs travel hundreds of miles. They explode. So what? I want a different intensity." Fleisher grabbed Wang's arm and showed how she was "dive-bombing" the keyboard from above. He asked for a more lateral motion. "Play forward and upward," he said, echoing a favorite phrase of Schnabel's. The transformation was instantaneous: in place of chords that crunch on impact, Wang got sounds that sang out after the initial zing.

The real Obi-Wan moments arrived when Fleisher told the pianists to "beat time" with their bodies, even when they were holding a chord, or to "want expression without trying to get it." And he had unnerving news for those who were listening in on the class, eagerly recording his every word: "I'm flattered that you're sitting here with pencils and scores, but if you were playing I might say the opposite."

Fleisher's demands can be gruelling, but the results in this case were dramatic. On March 31st, in a collective concert at Carnegie's Weill Hall, four pianists—Barnatan, Wang, Hiroko Sasaki, and Mana Tokuno—demonstrated what they had learned from some fifty hours of instruction. Wang's performance was the most immediately gripping. She had total command of the sometimes sadistically difficult C-Minor Sonata, and she conveyed a kind of joy in the challenge of it. Early on in the piece, she had trouble negotiating simpler, more songful passages, and by the end she still had not fully grasped the slow movement: the central, heart-stopping modulation from A minor to A-flat major went by as if nothing special had happened. But the second theme of the first movement, which she had initially pronounced "plain," glowed with life.

Barnatan was the most naturally poetic of the four pianists; he has an instinctive understanding of Schubert's fragile, deep world. Sometimes he got lost in the sounds he was creating; in the first movement, he kept losing track of the pulse and speeding up when he got loud. But in the Andante he made sounds that might have won the approval of Schnabel himself. Several times, he let his eyes drift penitentially toward the rafters, so that if you had been looking straight at him you would have seen only the whites of his eyes. ♦

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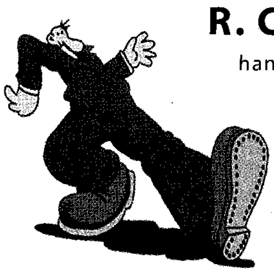

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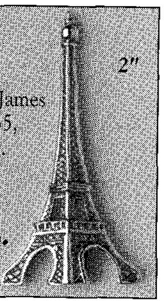

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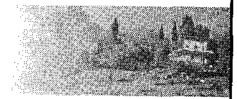

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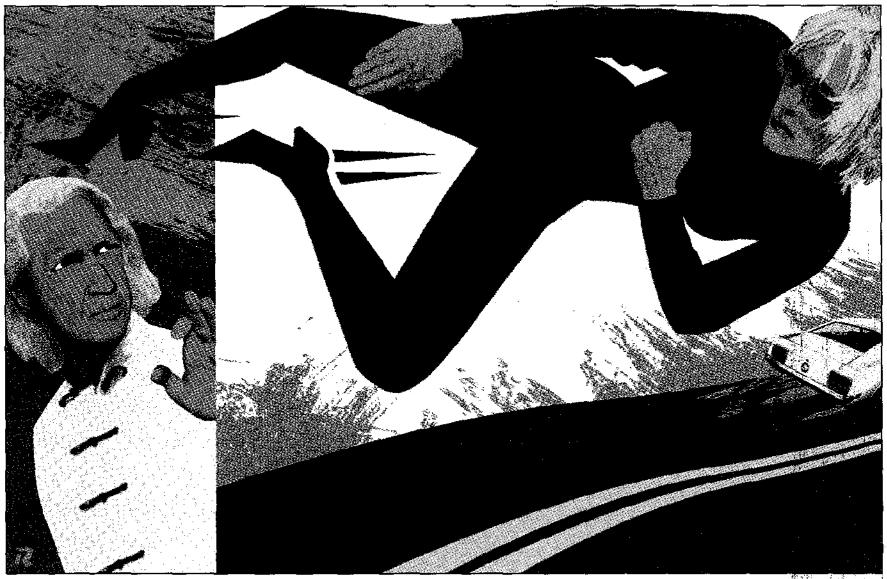


David Carradine and Uma Thurman in the second half of Quentin Tarantino's film.

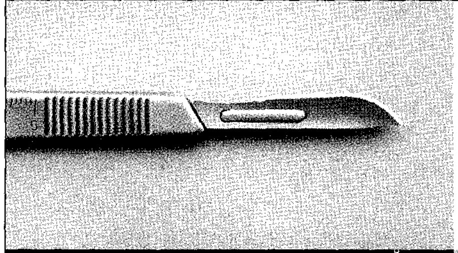
JOHN RITTER

Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill Vol. 2" is a shapeless mess, but at least it's not as monotonous as "Kill Bill Vol. 1." It has some landscape and some odd characters, whereas the earlier movie consisted mostly of sliced-cranium combat scenes and lacquered-glitz interiors and mock emotions like "anger" and "grief" that linked the fight episodes the way a thin string might hold a set of glittering flea-market jewels. "Kill Bill Vol. 1" was sequenced, but it wasn't really plotted; it had faces, bodies, and limbs (often severed), but it didn't have characters; it had spasmodic action but nothing approaching dramatic life. The heroine, Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman), known as "the Bride," attempted to leave a group of hired assassins headed by Bill (David Carradine), whose child she was carrying, and marry another man. But Bill showed up at her wedding rehearsal with the rest of the assassins, killed her groom and her friends, and left her for dead, too. Snapping out of a four-year coma in which she was repeatedly raped, the Bride then began to knock off the members of the group, who were known as the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, or DiVAS—most of them terrifically agile young women who killed with sword and karate chop. None of this made much sense, nor was it supposed to; you were not meant to ask whom the Vipers eliminated, or who paid them, or why one Viper hung out in a night club and another in the suburbs. The movie, never touching experience, was given over to Tarantino's obsessive love of schlock action genres.

In itself, an obsession with pop may not be a bad thing. Ang Lee, in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," borrowed the tropes of Asian martial-arts films but filled them out with history and friendship and the rituals of devotion and discipleship and, in the end, gave the material the weight and power of myth. Tarantino, using similar material, went in the opposite direction, into pure artifice and hyper-choreographed gesture and fountains-of-blood violence. "Kill Bill Vol. 1" was an unsteady combination of cult-film piety and lurid excess. Tarantino drew on the solemnity of Japanese genre movies; for instance, when the martial-arts star Sonny Chiba, as the samurai swordmaker Hattori Hanzo, presented a gleaming blade to Uma Thurman, the dignity of the ceremony was worthy of the emperor himself. But the rest of "Kill Bill" had nothing to do with serious Japanese themes; it was an American's spangled riff, and the sword scene sat there awkwardly, like an ancient religious statue deposited in a mall.

"Vol. 2" recapitulates the first movie and then follows the Bride's further adventures as she takes her revenge on one Viper after another, arriving at last at Bill's Mexican hideout, which appears to be a deluxe hotel. Originally planned as one film, "Kill Bill" wound up split into two. Budd (Michael Madsen), Bill's kid brother, was no more than a shadow in the first movie, but he gets a great deal of screen time now. Budd, it seems, was a DiVA (we had been led to believe that, except for Bill, the DiVAS were all women); he has also retired from the squad, and has been reduced to living in a trailer somewhere in the Southwest and working as a club bouncer. Tarantino puts in a long scene of Budd's humiliation at the hands of his boss. As you're watching, it feels like sheer padding—Budd's only real job in the movie is to die.

The Bride goes to Budd's trailer, but he surprises her, emptying two shotgun shells filled with rock salt into her, which stings like hell but doesn't kill. Budd then torments her before throwing her into a coffin and burying her alive. The earlier scene with Budd's boss now makes a little more sense. "Vol. 2," it turns out, is filled with episodes in which one person has power over another and prolongs the moment of control to the point of ritualized sadism. Budd expects the Bride to expire in her coffin, but another of the Vipers, Elle Driver (Daryl Hannah), shows up at the trailer and, for no good reason, humiliates Budd and kills him. Tarantino then flashes back to a scene of the Bride, as a girl, with the Chinese martial-arts master Pei Mei (Gordon Liu), who trains her by terrorizing her. This time, humiliation takes on a racial and sexual tinge. If the violence of the first film was endlessly bloody, the violence of this movie is in the taunting, heavy-



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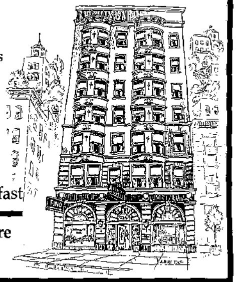

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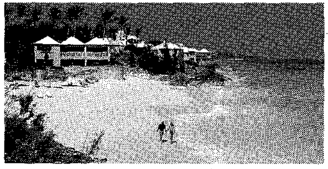

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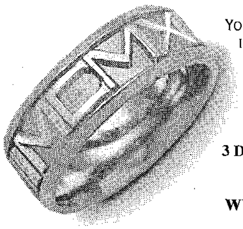

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menace style of old comic books and B movies. I don't think this can be called an advance.

Whatever one thought of Tarantino's earlier movies (I loved the brazen "Pulp Fiction" and admired the sober-sided "Jackie Brown"), one could see that his choices meant a great deal—that he knew how to create a mood, sustain a style, subversively invert a cliché. But his use of styles and references feels increasingly arbitrary and eccentric, the scenes joined together by associations and loyalties that can't possibly mean as much to anyone else as they mean to him. His allegiance to the actor Michael Parks, whose career went off the rails years ago, is lovely, but in "Vol. 2" he sets him up as a pimp presiding over a Mexican whorehouse, and the scene, which is unnecessary, goes nowhere; Parks is left stranded. The training sequences with Pei Mei, a haughty taskmaster living in a mountaintop temple, are brutal fun, but, again, as in the presentation-of-the-sword business, Tarantino seems caught between piety and mockery. Gordon Liu, a longtime star in Hong Kong martial-arts movies, wears a voluminous, wavy beard and enormous eyebrows, all snowy white, which make him look like an animated Chinatown doll, and when he whips his hand through his beard, in mandarin dismissal of the Bride's abilities, he seems not powerful but ridiculous, a prancing little snit.

Tarantino's intentions in such dorky scenes are unknowable, maybe even to him, and all a critic can say is that the scenes don't work, that the director's judgment has gone south—that he's become an incoherent maker of pop collage, not of cinema. In "Kill Bill Vol. 2," Tarantino, in apparent homage to Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns (Ennio Morricone, Leone's composer, is on the soundtrack), photographs the Bride's progress across the West in wide-open spaces. Yet, at the crucial moment, he doesn't hold to the demanding aesthetics of open space; he stages the violence in Budd's narrow trailer, where it's impossible to see anything clearly and he has to fake the violence in order to do it at all. The Bride, having escaped her coffin, takes on Elle, and the two tall, skinny blond actresses go at each other with knee, toe, and claw. The female savagery

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is exciting, in a garishly meaningless way, but the actual violence resembles two flies buzzing around in a bottle. All you see in this boxed-in space is motion, not the acts themselves.

Can one make an epic out of junk materials without transforming them? Tarantino obviously thinks so. Narrating the tale, Uma Thurman asserts that "the incident that put this whole gory story into motion"—the wedding massacre—"has already become legend." "Kill Bill Vol. 2" offers many such knowing allusions to its own devices and plot turns, as if Tarantino's purposely synthetic and goony flourishes had attained a consecrated status and now required commentary. This kind of lame self-memorialization can't be described as irony; on the contrary, Tarantino seems to be solemnizing his own trash aesthetic.

The filmmaker who, in "Pulp Fiction," appeared to have discovered a new way of writing dialogue for the movies—pop-surreal, nasty, and blazingly funny—has settled into a pseudo-suave idiom that lies across the screen like a lead-filled vest. Early in the movie, in a flashback to the wedding, Bill, chatting up the Bride before shooting her and her friends, says, "I've never been *nice* my whole life; I'll try to be *sweet*." They proceed to have a long mock-sinister conversation in which Bill is fatherly, patronizing, and vicious. Playing this self-conscious bore, Carradine looks more worn than legendary. He still has a good voice, but his eyes are tired, and his return at the end of the movie is an awful anticlimax. In the last of the control-and-humiliate scenes, Bill tranquillizes the Bride and prepares to kill her, and the two carry on a dialogue so bizarrely vacuous and arch in its elaboration of Bill's cruelty that it seems like the kind of "heavy" dramaturgy that passes for stoner sophistication. Bill, it turns out, has raised the baby that the Bride was carrying. In front of her, he now says things to the little girl like "I shot Mommy. I was very sad," and he makes the child tell a long, life-is-hell story about stepping on her pet fish. Tarantino may be too far removed from everyday existence to know that you can't manipulate a young child like that. The scene feels creepy, especially as the Bride, who has killed hundreds of people, grows increasingly serious about her maternal responsibilities. When it's time for the little girl to go to bed, the Bride climbs in beside her and turns on a video of the 1980 "Shogun Assassin"—a terrific movie, but hardly one for tots. Tarantino's ambition, however, is unmistakable: he wants to impress his obsessions on the succeeding generations. The pop encyclopedist and video-store genius has become a megalomaniac, and the exhilarating filmmaker he might have been is disappearing fast. ♦

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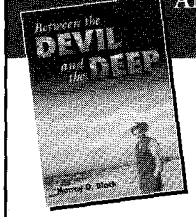

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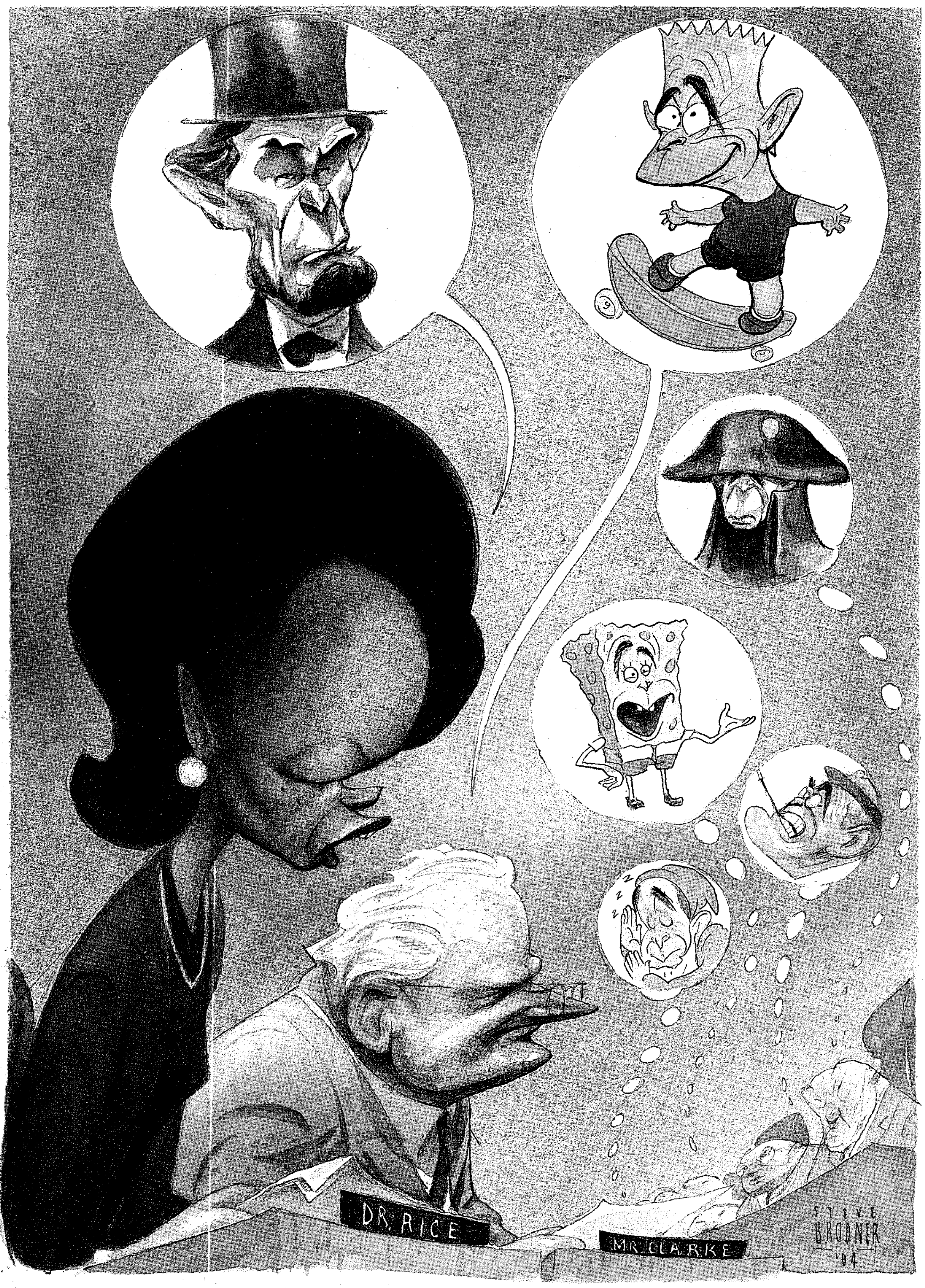
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